PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 277

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

FOURTH SESSION OF THE FIFTY-FIRST PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FORTY-FIFTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 1995–96

COMPRISING PERIOD
7 May—17 May 1996

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7 May 1996

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FOURTH SESSION OF THE FIFTY-FIRST PARLIAMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 27 APRIL 1992]

FORTY-FIFTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 277**

ELEVENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 1995–96

House of Commons

Tuesday 7 May 1996

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

Land Mines

1. **Mr. Timms:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent discussions he has had with his French counterpart on anti-personnel land mines. [26919]

3. **Mr. Sutcliffe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his policy on the use of land mines; and if he will make a statement. [26921]

The Minister of State for Defence Procurement (Mr. James Arbuthnot): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence is today attending the Western European Union Council of Ministers meeting in Birmingham and much regrets that he cannot be here.

We shall work actively for a total worldwide ban on anti-personnel land mines and keep in close touch with our allies about that issue. We welcome the outcome of the United Nations weaponry convention as an important step in the right direction.

Mr. Timms: Will the Minister join me in commending the ban introduced by the French Government on the production, stockpiling and export of all anti-personnel land mines? Why have the British Government not done the same?

Mr. Arbuthnot: We need to balance the real need to protect our armed forces with the need to move towards reducing the humanitarian dangers posed by land mines. We believe that we have achieved the right balance. We are in close touch with the French and we believe that we are doing things similar to them.

Mr. Sutcliffe: Is that not a contradiction: on the one hand, seeking a worldwide ban; while, on the other, seeking to modernise our requirements? Does that not point to a lack of clarity in the Government's view?

Mr. Arbuthnot: When we seek to achieve a balance between two inherently conflicting aims—both of which are perfectly justified—it is inevitable that we shall not achieve one or the other in totality. There is a real need to protect our armed forces as well as to protect civilians from the increasingly damaging effect of the proliferation of land mines. For that reason, we have supported a total ban on anti-personnel land mines and we shall work hard to achieve that objective. We had hoped that that conclusion would come out of last week's United Nations weaponry convention. Unfortunately, we did not get that far. We would have liked to go further, but we were very pleased to progress as far as we did.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: Is the Minister aware of the recent International Committee of the Red Cross report which says that the military value of anti-personnel land mines is substantially overstated? Does that not give rise to the moral question: should any self-respecting nation deploy weapons that cause human agony to civilians on a scale out of all proportion to their military value?

Mr. Arbuthnot: Yes, I have seen and read that report. I disagree with its conclusions. We must remember also that we are trying to contend with the real issue of those

countries that proliferate land mines indiscriminately rather than monitoring them and using them carefully in accordance with the rules of law, as this country does.

Dr. David Clark: Does not the Minister's answer expose the Government's recent announcement that they would ban land mines as a sham of the highest order? The reality is that, at a time when most other countries are seeking to ban land mines altogether, the Government are planning to modernise their stock by purchasing brand new and more effective land mines. Where will the Minister get the new land mines? Does he plan to commission British companies to produce them or will we import them from a third country? Has he no shame in escalating the production of that most deadly and barbaric of weapons?

Mr. Arbuthnot: Some 30 countries, including the United Kingdom, are hoping to ban land mines altogether. At the end of his question, the hon. Gentleman raised an issue that I freely acknowledge to be genuine, and that needs to be addressed, but we have not made a decision to upgrade our land mines. If we do not achieve a worldwide ban on land mines, as we would like, we shall consider at the appropriate time—which is not now—improving our land mines so that they incorporate a self-destruct capacity, which our present land mines do not. It must be sensible to make the land mines that we decide to continue to use—if we are forced into that position—less dangerous to the civilian population whom we are trying to protect.

Mr. James Hill: Does my hon. Friend agree that the British arms industry cannot be blamed for the circumstances in some parts of the world, such as Cambodia? More money needs to be spent on those gallant groups that are searching for and destroying land mines and trying to make sure that village paths are clear and people can till their fields. Is there no fund that can be used to make sure those people are able to continue that work?

Mr. Arbuthnot: My hon. Friend raised an extremely important point. I am pleased to say that the United Kingdom has contributed nearly £20 million to the clearance of mines in countries such as Cambodia. That issue is very much to the forefront of our thinking. The mines used by British forces do not pose a threat to civilian populations.

Army Recruitment

2. **Mr. Turner:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his Department's ability to recruit personnel to the Army. [26920]

The Minister of State for the Armed Forces (Mr. Nicholas Soames): We have taken and will continue to take decisive and urgent action to ensure that the Army gets the 15,000 high-quality new recruits that it needs each year.

Mr. Turner: Is it not the height of incompetence that the Conservative Government have cut manpower strength in the British Army by 25 per cent. and are failing to recruit new soldiers into the Army despite massive unemployment?

Mr. Soames: I am afraid that I cannot agree with the hon. Gentleman's spontaneous question. Although it is certainly true that the Army has been cut as a result of the greatly changed strategic setting and that certain sectors are finding recruitment difficult, for a number of different reasons with which the House is entirely familiar, not least of which is the present competitive job market, I am glad that we appear now to have turned the tide. In 1995, we saw a 33 per cent. increase in inquiries and a 25 per cent. increase in enlistment. We are not out of the woods yet, but we are well on the way.

Mr. Dover: Will the Minister review the policy that removed recruitment centres in high street shops, as that was an effective and cost-effective method of recruitment?

Mr. Soames: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is quite right to say that local recruiting centres are extremely valuable. A number of planned changes have been halted, pending the results of a trial that is proving most successful and involves working with our friends in the jobcentres. I am happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance and confirm that they are indeed valuable sources of recruits.

Mr. Spellar: Does the Minister now accept responsibility for the huge waste of public money in spending £500 million on redundancy and £100 million on recruitment in one year alone? Can he explain to the House how handing out compulsory redundancy notices would make recruitment attractive? Will he admit that his Department's handling of Army recruitment has been staggeringly incompetent?

Mr. Soames: One of the reasons why the Conservative party will win the next election is that it is quite plain that the Opposition do not understand defence or how it is run. It is also quite plain that, during a period of drawdown, services need to recruit at all times. They need to refresh the specialisations and aid structure at all ranks. Quite clearly, during a period of drawdown, the perception is that the forces no longer need to recruit. We have addressed that with vigour and determination and our policies are gaining all the time. The hon. Gentleman's question was a pretty facile attempt at a rather poor soundbite.

Mr. Nigel Evans: Will my hon. Friend confirm that, if the Government were to adopt Labour's policy and reduce defence expenditure of £4.5 billion to the European average, that would have a massive impact on personnel in the Army and other armed services and on equipment procurement, which would place in jeopardy the defence of the realm?

Mr. Soames: My hon. Friend is completely right. Such a policy would not only greatly harm the interests of the United Kingdom, whose armed forces are such a golden asset, but would seriously damage the job security of all the splendid young men and women who serve in our three forces and the interests of British industry, which provides such splendid equipment for our forces.

RB-44 Army Light Vehicle

4. **Mr. Davidson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement concerning the RB-44 Army light vehicle. [26922]

Mr. Arbuthnot: I am pleased that, as a result of the programme to resolve the braking problems that we had with the Reynolds Boughton RB-44 heavy utility truck, the vehicles are now re-entering service with the Army.

Mr. Davidson: Does the Minister agree that that was a poor answer for someone who has just rushed all the way from Glasgow to receive it? The vehicle's history is a litany of incompetence by the MOD and the private sector builder. Does the Minister agree that the matter would be far better passed to the National Audit Office for investigation?

Mr. Arbuthnot: No, I do not agree—I thought that it was rather a good answer. Of more than 800 vehicles that we bought, nearly two thirds are back in service with the Army, and the others are awaiting modifications. The modifications are relatively minor and the company is meeting the cost of providing kits to make them.

Type 23 Frigates

5. **Dr. Spink:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the advantages to the Royal Navy and to the United Kingdom of the Government's recent order for three type 23 frigates. [26923]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The order will provide a major enhancement to the Royal Navy's escort fleet and show the Government's commitment to first-class equipment for the armed forces. The order is worth around £400 million and will bring work to Yarrow and companies across the UK.

Dr. Spink: Does my hon. Friend agree that his answer illustrates two incontrovertible facts—that the UK continues to maintain the most professional, formidable and technologically superior armed forces; and that the great benefits to Scotland of remaining in the UK extend further than the Yarrow shipyard?

Mr. Arbuthnot: I agree. We have ordered some highly capable ships at a most affordable price, and by placing that order we have ensured the continuation in British industry of a capability that we need to see continued. The order is good news for the UK and for Scotland.

Procurement Projects

6. **Mr. Hutton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many of his Department's major procurement projects have late in-service dates. [26924]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The Ministry of Defence's most recent annual major projects report to the Public Accounts Committee showed that, of the projects covered, 21 were reported as having late actual or planned in-service dates.

Mr. Hutton: Is it a fact that the last National Audit Office inquiry showed that 90 per cent. of major procurement contracts had late in-service dates? Are not there significant delays in placing major new contracts, particularly in respect of the batch 2 Trafalgar class replacement programme? Why should defence industry workers pay the price of the Government's total and complete incompetence in managing the nation's procurement budget?

Mr. Arbuthnot: It is not a question of incompetence. There is a natural tendency towards delay in a large number of defence contracts. That is partly because trying to match the requirements of different countries to a collaborative project is extremely difficult, and partly the effect of increasing and speedily advancing new technology. Delay can actually bring benefits. If there is delay in acquiring a piece of equipment, it can mean a better piece of equipment, and sometimes one that is cheaper.

The greatest example of a UK technological project was the Trident system. The hon. Gentleman may agree, although I suggest that he has a word with some of his colleagues on the Opposition Benches, who might not share his views. The Trident system has been an 11-year project that has come in on time and under budget. It has provided a defence of this country beyond all proportion to the amount of money that we have spent on it.

Mr. Mans: Does my hon. Friend agree that the one way to ensure that all procurement projects do not meet their in-service dates is to carry out a full-scale defence review, as advocated by the Opposition? That would have a devastating effect on jobs in the defence industry, especially in my county of Lancashire, which depends so heavily on defence industries.

Mr. Arbuthnot: My hon. Friend is right. I have always believed that the Opposition want to carry out a major defence review because they lack the courage to say what they really want to do, which is to make deep defence cuts. We know that they want to do that. My hon. Friend raises the point that a defence review would mean that equipment procurement would come to a standstill, and that would be the effect of electing a party that we know we cannot trust on defence.

Royal Navy

7. **Mr. Eric Clarke:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the strength of the Royal Navy in 1990; and what will be the strength of the Royal Navy under current plans by the end of the decade. [26925]

Mr. Soames: The total strength of the Royal Navy on 1 April 1990 was 63,000. The estimated strength for 1 April 1999 is some 44,000, including the Royal Marines and personnel undergoing training.

Mr. Clarke: Will the Minister explain how he reconciles the fact that the Conservative manifesto in 1992 stated that a cut of 27 per cent. in the armed forces would be devastating with the 30 per cent. cut in the Royal Navy?

Mr. Soames: I know that the hon. Gentleman, living in the wonderful time warp of Midlothian, will not have noticed that there has been an extraordinary change in the

strategic setting that governs the deployment and support structures of our armed forces. Manpower strength is not the prime determinant of the Navy's military capability. The Navy today is probably better equipped and better manned than it has ever been. It is performing a fantastic job and I pay tribute to its extraordinary professionalism and to the way that the Navy has coped with the changes. Today, there are more than 46 British ships at sea, 25 on Exercise Purple Star, and many others promoting Britain's interests in a professional manner, which is very advantageous to this country.

Mr. David Martin: Can my hon. Friend confirm that—as I find in Portsmouth—while the Navy is smaller, morale is high and the professionalism with which it goes about its tasks is second to none? Does my hon. Friend know of any proposals from Labour or the Liberal Democrats that would increase the efficiency of the Royal Navy or increase the numbers of people who serve in it?

Mr. Soames: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and I know that the Royal Navy is grateful for his support in Portsmouth. He is right to point out that morale in the Royal Navy is high. The personnel of the Royal Navy are working hard and are away from home rather more than we would like, but they do a remarkable job. I know of no such proposals from the other parties and the only proposals that we have heard are those that are likely to harm gravely the Royal Navy and the defence interests of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Dalyell: Does the Minister know anything about Midlothian? Can he name one town in the county?

Mr. Soames: What I know about Midlothian, one could write on the back of a very large stamp. I know that it is a marvellous and wonderful place in Scotland and that it is lucky enough to have the hon. Member for Midlothian (Mr. Clarke) as one of its Members of Parliament. The hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) made Midlothian famous by the Midlothian question, to which we are all waiting to hear the answer.

Lady Olga Maitland: Does my hon. Friend agree, further to his remarks, that it is not manpower alone that is needed for the Navy of the future, but high technology? Does he further agree that our ships are now equipped with the best technology that this country can provide and that we need to have a sense of priorities so that we are fit and capable of fighting into the next century?

Mr. Soames: My hon. Friend is right. The Royal Navy is probably technologically better equipped now than it has ever been. As my hon. Friend knows, the acquisition of Tomahawk will greatly expand its opportunities, and the type 23 frigate, which my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Dr. Spink) has just mentioned, is not only a more sophisticated ship in every way, both technologically and in terms of capability, but requires 30 per cent. fewer crew than its predecessor while being a far more powerful ship. Those are the ways in which we are going and they are inevitably the ways in which technology drives the armed forces. Britain is at the forefront of taking advantage of all those exciting new opportunities.

Mr. Murphy: How can we take the Minister seriously when he talks about either the geography of Midlothian or about defending and preserving our Navy, when it is his Government who have presided over the rundown of the fleet and issued thousands of redundancy notices to Navy personnel? Can he not see that not only the Royal Navy but all three armed services have nothing for which to thank the Government and are as anxious as everyone else in Britain to get rid of them?

Mr. Soames: My geography may be a bit rusty, but I do not think that West Lothian is that far from Midlothian. However, I apologise to the hon. Member for Linlithgow, and to Mr. Gladstone.

Again, the hon. Gentleman, like so many of his hon. Friends, is living in a complete time warp. *[Interruption.]* New Labour is no more new Labour than jump the moon; it is just old Labour in a new suit of clothes. The Royal Navy, unlike the Labour party, has genuinely moved on. It has moved on to embrace new technologies, new equipment and new ways of producing the support that it needs. It has done that with great skill and it has managed the transition extremely effectively. It deserves great credit. The kind of arrant nonsense talked by the Opposition again more than confirms the fact that all Conservative Members know in our hearts that, primarily because the Labour party cannot be trusted with defence, we shall win the next election.

Forces in Europe (Deployment)

8. **Mr. Booth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the extent of deployment of Her Majesty's forces in Europe. [26926]

Mr. Soames: British forces are currently deployed in Germany, Cyprus, Italy, Gibraltar, the Adriatic and the Mediterranean, and they make a significant contribution to the peace implementation force in Bosnia.

Mr. Booth: Will my hon. Friend congratulate our forces serving in IFOR? Does not the success of their deployment there show that the proposal to put them under the European Union command is not only unwanted, but unnecessary?

Mr. Soames: Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend. I join him in warmly congratulating the performance of the 10,500 British troops on the ground in Bosnia and the further 1,200 Royal Navy and Royal Air Force troops offshore and in Italy. They have performed outstandingly well and done great credit to this country. It is plain, when NATO had to go in, that it was the only organisation in Europe that could possibly have run such an operation because it has the command and control structures and the necessary equipment, kit and experience to undertake such an operation. It certainly would not be an operation for the Western European Union or for the European Union.

Dr. Reid: We welcome the decision to deploy four squadrons of Tornado from RAF Brüggen and its associated facilities. It is sensible on operational and financial grounds. We also welcome the reports at the weekend that the most fundamental strategic review of doctrine since the second world war is currently being carried out within the Ministry of Defence. We are glad that, despite the shouting from the Government Benches,

the Government are doing exactly what we suggested. We are happy on this occasion that they should keep shouting one thing and doing another. It will make it so much easier for the next Labour Government.

Mr. Soames: I thought for a second that the hon. Gentleman was talking about the Labour party's policy on homosexuals, but clearly not. I must disabuse the hon. Gentleman of one illusion. There is nothing fundamental about the review. It is a drawing together of strategic doctrine to reflect the new joint operational structure of the Ministry of Defence, the establishment of the new permanent joint headquarters and the creation of the joint rapid deployment force, all of which I know will have passed the hon. Gentleman by.

There is nothing secret about it. Consultation will take place not only within the Ministry of Defence and across all three services, but with academics and many others. That is a serious and sensible response to a strategic doctrine which the country has been putting into practice for a long time; but, following the creation of the joint rapid deployment force and the permanent joint headquarters, the elements of that response need to be drawn together.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he said about Brüggen. We believe that we are taking a sensible step. Although I regret the fact that there will no longer be an RAF presence in Germany after a long and glorious history, there is no doubt that that is right not only for all the people concerned, but for the aircraft.

Mr. Wilkinson: I, too, greatly welcome the Government's decision to bring the RAF back from Germany: following the disbanding of the Warsaw pact, it makes evident sense. May I, however, urge the Government to bring the squadrons back from Laarbruch before 1999 and from Brüggen before 2002? It would make sense to have aircraft flying from RAF Honington again, and to have RAF Scampton open again, thus providing jobs for British people.

Mr. Soames: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and acknowledge his expertise. He will appreciate that we have consulted our allies closely, and have assured them that our commitment to NATO remains unaffected. The four Tornado GR1 squadrons will be returned to existing United Kingdom bases.

I note what my hon. Friend said about Honington and Scampton, and I have no doubt that we shall consider carefully what to do. As a matter of fact, we believe that the redeployment of the aircraft in the United Kingdom will potentially increase their operational effectiveness. We hope that we shall soon be able to announce where they will be based, but I shall certainly bear in mind what my hon. Friend has said.

Trident Missiles

9. **Mrs. Fyfe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Trident missiles are to be ordered in each year from 1997 under present orders; and what will be the total number bought when all orders are acquired. [26927]

Mr. Arbuthnot: So far, the UK has purchased 44 Trident missiles from the United States. No UK missiles are on order, but remaining orders are likely to be placed within the next three years in line with the UK's programme and the US's overall procurement strategy. Some initial financial commitment to that end has been made.

Mrs. Fyfe: Has the Minister noted that, according to the United States strategic command report to Congress, the number of missiles on order from the United Kingdom will be seven in 1997, seven in the following year and seven in the year after that—a total of 21, in addition to the existing 44? Can the Minister tell us the reason for that huge escalation?

Mr. Arbuthnot: The figures that have emerged in the United States amount to no more than the assessment of our current financial plans. We have not made a final decision on the figures, but they reflect our current plans, and they do not represent an escalation in relation to our Polaris firepower.

Mr. Brazier: Will my hon. Friend confirm that nuclear threats in the world, potential and actual, are expanding, despite the fall of the Berlin wall? Two, or possibly three, ex-Soviet countries still have nuclear weapons, and nuclear technology is proliferating in the middle east. Is it not essential that we in the Conservative party are seen to uphold Britain's strategic nuclear deterrent?

Mr. Arbuthnot: Yes. As is so often the case, my hon. Friend has made a valid point. The Labour party aspires to power, but many Labour Members would like Trident to be abolished. We are faced with questions on Trident with which we would not be faced if Labour had won the last general election, or the one before that, or the one before that—because we would not have a nuclear missile at all.

Cadet Forces

10. **Mr. Riddick:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the educational advantages that membership of the cadet forces gives to its members. [26928]

Mr. Soames: My colleagues and I are very much aware of the splendid benefit that the cadet force organisations can bring to the education and well being of young people in this country. It is important that parents and teachers alike recognise the wonderful opportunities that membership brings to the broad education of the young.

Mr. Riddick: Is my hon. Friend aware that there are active squadrons of the air training corps in Holmfirth and Huddersfield in my constituency and that they both play a valuable role in local community service? Does he agree that the education of those youngsters should include the facts about the Labour party's natural aspirations to cut defence spending by billions of pounds, so that the country's young people are aware that the nation's defences would not be safe under a Labour Government?

Mr. Soames: My hon. Friend is completely right, of course. I join him in paying tribute to the air training corps in Huddersfield, which on average parades 60 cadets, and in Holmfirth, which on average parades 30 cadets. They have an exceptional record in the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme and an excellent commitment to

community service. I also pay tribute to those who take part in the cadet forces, especially all the adults who give up their time to help and provide leadership. Frankly, the less the young know about Labour party policies the better.

Ms Walley: Will the Minister also pay tribute to the air training corps in my constituency? Does he share my concern, having read page 11 of today's edition of *The Daily Telegraph*, that the future of RAF flying teachers might be in jeopardy? Where will that leave the ATC? The Government have cut costs so much that they have effectively done away with the RAF flying instructors on which the ATC depends.

Mr. Soames: I certainly pay tribute to the air training corps in the hon. Lady's constituency. I am sure that there, as in all hon. Members' constituencies, it does a marvellous job and stands as a beacon in the communities in which it serves. On flying training, the hon. Lady, not for the first time, has got the wrong end of the stick. I can assure her without any diffidence that the air cadets will get all the flying to which they are entitled. Indeed, it is the MoD's aspiration to provide more and not less flying.

Joint and Combined Exercises

11. **Mr. Quentin Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what joint and combined exercises are planned in the near future. [26929]

Mr. Soames: Exercise Purple Star, the largest joint and combined operation for a number of years, involving about 12,000 UK forces, began at the end of last month and continues until 19 May. The House will be pleased to know that that combined UK-US exercise includes key elements of the planned joint rapid deployment force.

Mr. Davies: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the Government's support for that very important exercise. May I express the hope that the Government will continue to attach a very high priority to the value of exercises in general, and to combined and joint exercises in particular since, as I am sure he would agree, they are essential to the maintenance of our military preparedness and therefore our capability?

Mr. Soames: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting one of the great difficulties facing modern defence management—the ability to provide the kind of high level, high intensity warfare training, which is so essential to keeping our troops prepared for the extraordinary range of operations that may be required of them. The key elements of the JRDF—the Third Commando Brigade and the Fifth Airborne Brigade—are taking part. It is a major exercise and I assure my hon. Friend that we shall do everything in our power, whether in America, in this country or in the new training areas that are opening up in Hungary and Poland where we hope to have a brigade exercise in September, to ensure that as many of our troops as possible receive the benefit of those very important exercises. We seriously acknowledge the point he makes; it is crucial.

Mr. Cohen: Is it a joint exercise between the hon. Gentleman's Department and the Foreign Office to run spies in Russia? Are they carrying on at cold war levels and expense? Is it not time to stop such James Bond silliness and apologise to President Yeltsin?

Mr. Soames: Certainly not.

Defence Contracts

12. **Mr. John Greenway:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many British jobs are sustained by his Department's contracts; and if he will make a statement. [26930]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The most recent available figures are for 1993-94, when an estimated 395,000 jobs in the UK were sustained by the defence industry, including 315,000 sustained directly by my Department's spending on equipment and non-equipment items.

Mr. Greenway: In an ever-changing and uncertain world, does my hon. Friend agree that a credible defence policy demands a substantial home-based defence industry? Will he assure the House that, after all the upheaval of "Options for Change" and defence cost studies the Government have no intention of seeking further substantial reductions in defence expenditure, which could only have a catastrophic effect on jobs in the defence procurement industry?

Mr. Arbuthnot: A credible defence policy depends on the election of a party which believes in defence, and my hon. Friend has established that our party does. The Labour party, sadly, does not. It has called for reductions in defence spending which would reduce our capability out of all recognition. The Transport and General Workers Union at its conference called for a cut of £18 billion. That would leave the defence of this country in the hands of civilians, because we would not be able to afford any armed forces or any equipment. Either that, or we would be able to afford about half our equipment, but we would not be able to afford the civilians or the armed forces to run it.

Mr. Barry Jones: What is the status of the future large aircraft project? Have the French sorted out their problems? My constituents would like a positive answer.

Mr. Arbuthnot: Once again, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his assiduity in working for his constituents. He brought a delegation to see me only two weeks ago. I have spoken to the French about this matter. They have yet to decide their law of programmation. As soon as they do, we shall be clearer about precisely what the French position is. I welcome the fact that the hon. Gentleman brought a delegation to see me about this very matter.

Fisheries Protection Fleet

13. **Mrs. Gorman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Royal Naval vessels are contracted to MAFF as part of the fisheries protection fleet. [26931]

Mr. Soames: Nine vessels currently comprise the fisheries protection squadron. Four or five are routinely at sea on behalf of MAFF and one for the Scottish Fishery Protection Agency at any one time.

Mrs. Gorman: Will my hon. Friend confirm what his office has told me today—that 17 vessels are contracted

out to MAFF from the defence forces and that they are engaged in policing the quota of fish caught by our fishing vessels, including Mr. Trevor Mole from Essex, who has been fined unreasonably for taking a little more than his quota out of the seas? At the same time, the Spanish, who are busily scooping up our fish, have only nine vessels in action, but as a nation we can do nothing about the situation while we remain within the European Union. Is it not time we gave people a chance to decide whether they want to continue being part of the EU or not?

Mr. Soames: I think that that goes a little wide of the question. I am happy to confirm to my hon. Friend that all the fishing vessels operating in United Kingdom waters are liable to fair and rigorous inspection by the Royal Navy, regardless of their nationality. As my hon. Friend knows, because she has done a great deal of work on the matter, the role of the fisheries protection squadron is to enforce fisheries protection and to ensure that all vessels can go safely about their lawful business. The role of the squadron is one that it discharges with scrupulous fairness. I am sure that my hon. Friend will join me in paying tribute to it for doing what is often a difficult and dangerous job.

Dr. Godman: I sometimes think that the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) would like to deploy the fleet against the European Union.

Mrs. Gorman *indicated assent.*

Dr. Godman: The hon. Lady nods.

The officers and crews of the fisheries protection vessels do a good job in protecting our stocks. Does the Minister agree that they need the most modern ships possible to deal with those guilty of illegal fishing? What vessels does he intend to order to bring the fleet up to date?

Mr. Soames: As the hon. Gentleman is very knowledgeable about the fishing community, I know that he will join me in saying how much the fishermen value the efforts made on their behalf by the Royal Navy. They are truly fortunate to have such excellent protection. As the hon. Gentleman knows and I know, the squadron enjoys the most excellent relations with the fishing industry and fishermen alike. There are currently nine vessels in the squadron. Six are purpose-built Island class offshore patrol vessels, which do the job extremely well, and three are Hunt class mine counter-measures vessels seconded from their parent MCM squadron. We believe that they do the job very well indeed. If there are plans to change the deployment of any of the vessels, we shall, of course, talk to the hon. Gentleman about it. I know of no plans to replace any of them.

Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Threat

14. **Mr. Duncan Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the nuclear, biological and chemical threat to the United Kingdom. [26932]

Mr. Soames: The nuclear, biological and chemical threat to the United Kingdom is assessed at present as extremely low, although we remain anxious for the future.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Does my hon. Friend agree that, in view of all the proliferation that is happening and is likely to happen, and the evidence of Libya's underground chemical and biological plant, the nature of the developing threat necessitates a powerful deterrent and that a deterrent is no use if the Government who hold it are not prepared to use it?

Mr. Soames: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. It would be folly to be complacent. We take very seriously the possible threat of nuclear, biological or chemical attack on the United Kingdom. Proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery remain a major source of concern for the United Kingdom and our NATO partners and is, as my hon. Friend rightly said, another essential reason why we need to retain our independent deterrent. I wholeheartedly share his concerns about the construction of the new facility in Libya, which we are monitoring closely with our American friends.

PRIME MINISTER

Engagements

Q1. **Mr. Matthew Banks:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Tuesday 7 May. [26949]

The Prime Minister (Mr. John Major): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further meetings later today.

Mr. Banks: My right hon. Friend is well aware of the strong support that I have given to those in Southport who have sought to raise teaching standards in our schools. In the light of today's Ofsted report on reading, will he spare a thought for parents in Islington and Southwark whose children, according to the report, have been failed by weak and mediocre teaching methods? Does he agree that, if we are to improve standards in our schools, improved teaching methods must be the cornerstone of the Government's education policy?

The Prime Minister: I do feel for those parents, which is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has announced new measures today to root out and shine the light on those bad, Labour-controlled local authorities whose record was shown up so sadly in the report from Ofsted over the weekend. The Labour party's only response to that is to threaten to give more powers to those very same councils to which its Front-Bench spokesmen will not entrust their own children.

Mr. Blair: Can the Prime Minister confirm today's reports that, in the next Conservative manifesto, he will pledge to privatise the Post Office? Is he aware of the enormous concern of many people in rural areas who fear for the future of their post offices and postal services?

The Prime Minister: I fear that the right hon. Gentleman does not seem to understand that many rural post offices—a very important part of local communities—are already in private hands. It is astonishing that he does not seem to know that.

Mr. Blair: It is completely astonishing that the Prime Minister does not understand the concern of those people

that the post offices will be sold off. Will the Prime Minister confirm that, over the next few years, the Treasury intends taking an extra £400 million out of Post Office profits and that that money will simply be another back-door Tory tax? Is that right or not?

The Prime Minister: I can confirm to the right hon. Gentleman that we are looking to make sure that the Post Office gives customers the efficient and effective service that they deserve. I repeat to him, since he clearly still does not understand it, that the rural post offices that he is concerned about are in private hands and that they are efficient and effective. I am astonished that the right hon. Gentleman does not understand that.

Mr. Blair: I have asked the Prime Minister twice whether that will be in the Conservative manifesto. If he is so confident about it, perhaps he can tell us whether it will be. As for a better service, let him tell that to the water customers whose prices have risen by 40 per cent. Perhaps he does not understand that the Conservatives' obsession with privatising our public services is one reason among many others for their humiliation last Thursday. Would it not be better in future if he paid less attention to the factions in his own party and more to the voice of the British people?

The Prime Minister: I was wondering how the right hon. Gentleman would manage to get around to that from privatisation, but I suppose that I should have known from precedent that it does not matter what the first two questions are, the soundbite is always prepared. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. We cannot hear hon. Members.

Q2. **Sir Wyn Roberts:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Tuesday 7 May. [26950]

The Prime Minister: I refer my right hon. Friend to the answer I gave some moments ago.

Sir Wyn Roberts: Reverting to education, will my right hon. Friend confirm that this Conservative Government will not take away the £560 per annum of child benefit for the over-16s on which so many families rely to get their children through A-levels? Does he agree that the scrapping of child benefit at that level would be devastating for many families and would prevent many youngsters from going on to further education?

The Prime Minister: I can of course confirm that. Since the leader of the Labour party is so interested in what will be in manifestos, perhaps he can confirm that the scrapping of child benefit for youngsters of 16 and 17, as proposed by the shadow Chancellor and objected to by the shadow Foreign Secretary, will be in Labour's manifesto, at a time when child benefit is being supported by Labour's official spokesman on social security. Perhaps he would care to make that clear speedily. On the merits of the case, there is no doubt that that would be a severe disadvantage—*[Interruption.]* You can tell when the right hon. Gentleman does not want to answer: he chats to his hon. Friends. That policy would be a severe disadvantage to many families on low incomes who want their children to have a better start in education than they themselves had.

Mr. Ashdown: On the first day of the war crimes tribunal in The Hague, does the Prime Minister recognise that peace in Bosnia is more at risk through the ambitions to create a greater Croatia than through any threat from a greater Serbia? Does he at least recognise that the withdrawal of IFOR without replacement in November would mean that there would be no chance of an unchaperoned peace persisting? Does he recognise that the west must now insist on the inviolability of Bosnia's borders and must halt Croatia's quietly annexing Bosnian territory?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the fact that the peace is uneasy across the former Yugoslavia. That is undoubtedly the case. At this stage, it is too early to judge what will be necessary at the time when IFOR withdraws. There is a great deal to be done. Thus far, the military work has been immensely successful. There is quite a lot still to be done on the civilian side. We shall need to make the judgment to which the right hon. Gentleman referred at a later stage.

Q3. **Mr. Harry Greenway:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Tuesday 7 May. [26951]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Greenway: Does my right hon. Friend share the deep concern of the British people and all of us—*[Interruption.]* I am quoting the Leader of the Opposition, who loves to talk about the British people. We represent the British people here. *[Interruption.]* Yes, we do, and we always will and the Opposition had better learn that. Does my right hon. Friend share the deep concern of the British people and myself at Ofsted's report today of appallingly low reading standards in three Labour-controlled local authorities? Does he agree that generations of children have been let down educationally and in other ways by the Labour and Liberal parties while the leader of the Labour party and others in that party have rescued their children into Conservative authorities and selective schools but would deny those opportunities to others? *[Interruption.]* Yes, they would.

The Prime Minister: I do not blame anyone, whoever he or she may be, for taking advantage of Conservative Government reforms on education or on anything else. It is certainly true that Labour Front-Bench Members know an awful lot about schools in Islington and Southwark—sufficient, certainly, to send their children elsewhere.

Mr. David Marshall: Following last Thursday's election results, has the Prime Minister given any thought to how his premiership is perceived by the great British

population? Does he not realise that, far from giving an Oscar-winning performance, he is regarded politically as a dead man walking?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support. I can tell him quite sincerely that it is not reciprocated.

Q4. **Mr. Riddick:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Tuesday 7 May. [26952]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Riddick: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government will grant export licences for any orders for British beef received from countries outside the European Union? Is it not time for the British Government actively to promote the sale of British beef to countries all over the world, as a clear demonstration to the British public and to British farmers that we will not stand idly by while European farm Ministers destroy this country's beef industry to the benefit of their own?

The Prime Minister: I share the concern and frustration expressed by my hon. Friend. We continue to believe that the ban on British beef products is unjustified and disproportionate. The European Commission President and the Agriculture Commissioner have now accepted that British beef is safe. On that basis, there is no justification for member states retaining the ban. We continue to press the Commission and other member states for a comprehensive framework for the speedy relaxation and complete removal of the ban.

Mr. Faulds: To placate the loony Little Englanders behind him, why does not the Prime Minister—*[Interruption.]* You will hear me in the end. Why does not the Prime Minister send an expeditionary force under Field Marshal Cash and a gunboat under the lunatically immature Redwood to teach the bloody foreigners a lesson?

The Prime Minister: I think that the hon. Gentleman is well aware of the fact that the view right across my party is that we are better off remaining in the European Union, and I have expressed that view on many occasions. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman is aware of who it was who once said:

"Many voters, including myself, are still unconvinced it was a good idea to join the Common Market in the first place."

In case he does not know, it was the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Q5. **Mr. Sweeney:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Tuesday 7 May. [26953]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Sweeney: Could my right hon. Friend find time to visit the Vale of Glamorgan in the next few months, where on Thursday there was a local government by-election with a 10 per cent. swing to the Conservatives? Does he agree that that swing shows that the Conservative fight back has started well and truly in the most marginal seats in Britain? Does he agree that the fact that the Labour-controlled Vale of Glamorgan council has just raised council tax by 22 per cent. demonstrates that Labour government, whether locally or nationally, is bad for our pockets?

The Prime Minister: I think that history certainly supports my hon. Friend's claim, and so do current events. The Labour leader and the shadow Transport Secretary both want a higher rate for middle income earners and the deputy leader—alas, missing today—wants a higher top rate of tax. They are in complete turmoil over their plans for child benefit, which amount to an extra 5p on income tax for a family on average earnings. The fact is that raising taxes is the Labour instinct—it is in Labour's blood, and nothing will stop it.

Mr. Wigley: Is the Prime Minister aware of figures published last month which show that, for the first time, gross domestic product per head in the Irish Republic has now passed that of Wales? Does he believe that that is because of the very strong voice that the Irish Republic has in the European Union and the benefits that it receives from that, or is it because of his Government's failure to develop a good spread of well-paid jobs throughout Wales?

The Prime Minister: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman has a look at some of the jobs in Wales which are the result of inward investment and which would not be there but for the Government. As for the GDP figure, the hon. Gentleman might bear in mind the fact that a substantial amount of the Irish Republic's GDP—5 per cent. or 7 per cent.—is a direct subvention from the European Union.

Cattle Disposal Scheme

3.30 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall) (*by private notice*) asked the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to make a statement on what progress has been made in giving effect to the 30-month cattle disposal scheme.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Tony Baldry): Slaughtering started in Scotland on Friday and elsewhere in the United Kingdom today. Some 104 livestock markets and some 72 abattoirs have been approved as collection centres. I anticipate substantially increasing activity as the week proceeds and see no reason why the scheme should not be fully operational by the end of this week.

I have made it clear that all operators in the meat business will have to work together to make the 30-month cattle scheme a success. I met representatives of livestock markets and a number of abattoir representatives this morning and I am seeing the renderers tomorrow. They represent the crucial steps in the chain.

Large numbers of animals have to be processed, and I will need to ensure that this is done as speedily as possible so that farmers can have surplus stock removed from their fields and, quite reasonably, be paid compensation as quickly as possible.

We have at all times to have regard to the welfare of the animals involved and the need to restore consumer confidence. The scheme is being put in place as one of a number of measures to restore confidence in British beef. It is a novel scheme without precedent, and we have sought to set it up with all possible speed.

Farmers, livestock markets, abattoirs and renderers have to work together. They do so usually and they have to do so now. Every day I intend to see representatives of all the main interests to deal with any problems that might arise, but I hope that it is not long before the scheme no longer requires daily ministerial involvement.

Farmers will, I am sure, recognise that large numbers of animals have to be culled and that they cannot all be culled immediately. As the House knows, there is finite rendering capacity, so I am examining with all speed whether and what possible further cold store capacity can be brought into play to help accelerate the scheme.

I well appreciate the concern of every hon. Member that the scheme should operate fully and efficiently without delay. I promise to keep hon. Members updated regularly on progress and am determined that the scheme will make a positive contribution to our wider aim of restoring confidence in the British beef as speedily as possible.

Mr. Tyler: I thank the Minister of State for his extensive statement. Does he now accept the assessment of this week's *Farmers Weekly* that the Government's scheme is still in complete chaos? Does he also accept that the statement made by the Minister last week that this has absolutely nothing to do with the removal of the export ban pins the responsibility here with his Ministry in London? Does he further accept the report of the *Environmental Health News* that the Meat Hygiene Service does not have enough qualified staff to undertake the cull programme and that the abattoirs have reasonable cause for concern? How many cattle are in the chain awaiting slaughter as of today? How will the blockage be removed by the steps that the Minister has announced? Is it not clear that a great industry in our rural areas is being held at gunpoint by the dither and delay of his Department?

Mr. Baldry: I am driving the scheme and I accept full responsibility for it. The hon. Gentleman has to accept that this is a novel and fairly complex scheme. It also involves our European Community partners who, in large part, are paying for it. We need to ensure that what happens in the slaughterhouses is properly monitored. We also need to ensure that there is no scintilla of risk that any of this beef ends up in the human food chain, and there are more than enough Meat Hygiene Service staff to ensure that that is done. We need to ensure a proper geographical coverage of collection centres—both slaughterhouses and livestock markets. We also need to ensure that the sectoral interests start to work together, as they do normally, to ensure that the scheme is a success.

The hon. Gentleman is quite right: there is a backlog. I am aware that farmers want the backlog cleared off their fields as speedily as possible—not least, quite reasonably, because they want to receive their compensation cheques. There are approximately 120,000 cattle in the backlog and they need to be processed as speedily as possible. I hope that I have made it clear to hon. Members that I will take all possible measures to ensure that that is done. I hope that everyone who is involved will settle down and co-operate to ensure that the scheme is a success.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. The House was somewhat noisy when the hon. Gentleman put his original question. Therefore, I draw the attention of all hon. Members to the specific question, which relates to the 30-month cattle disposal scheme. This is not a private notice question that should be used as an opportunity to raise other issues related to BSE. The question is very specific.

Mr. Michael Alison (Selby): Is my hon. Friend aware that the 30-month cattle scheme is very welcome—even if, like a heavy aircraft, it is trundling along the runway before becoming fully airborne? Is my hon. Friend conscious of the fact that considerable costs arise for some farmers in getting their cattle to the collecting points? Will those costs be debited from the compensation payable in respect of each cow or will they be borne by the scheme?

Mr. Baldry: Farmers have always met the costs of transporting livestock to livestock markets and of transporting livestock direct to abattoirs when they have chosen to do that. The only issue that arises is whether farmers should bear the cost of transporting livestock from livestock markets to abattoirs if they choose to go through the live weight option. It seems not unreasonable in this scheme that farmers should do so, not least—as I made clear on Friday in a letter that I sent to all hon. Members—because they are being relieved of the obligation to pay the Meat and Livestock Commission levy. I hope that farmers will see this as a fair scheme, under which they are receiving fair compensation. It is not unreasonable for farmers to meet the transport costs.

Dr. Gavin Strang (Edinburgh, East): I remind the Minister that last Thursday the Prime Minister told the

Leader of the Opposition that the confusion surrounding the scheme was being examined and investigated and that he hoped that it would be resolved speedily. Is it not becoming clear that last week's confusion is developing into this week's chaos? It is vital that we eliminate BSE at source. We therefore need to investigate why it is that 67 per cent. of new cases—

Madam Speaker: Order. I have made clear the narrow scope of questions relating to the private notice question, so the hon. Gentleman is fully aware of that. He must relate his question to the 30-month cattle disposal scheme only and not to wider issues. If he has a further question to put on that specific scheme, I will, of course, hear it.

Dr. Strang: I certainly have. If that is your ruling on the private notice question—

Madam Speaker: It is not only my ruling: the question itself demands it.

Dr. Strang: I accept that, but can I put it to you, Madam Speaker—[HON. MEMBERS: "No."] It relates to a different point. Because we may kill hundreds of thousands of cattle under the scheme it is all the more vital that we attach priority to devising a live test to avoid the need for killing in the long term. It would be unforgivable if the Ministry was in any way involved in delaying the establishment of such a live test.

Since it has been decided to have a live weight and a dead weight option for the 30-month rule, Ministers have a responsibility to ensure that compensation is not only fair to farmers but fair to all sections of the livestock industry and the taxpayer. I put it to the Minister that the entire industry wants to tackle the problem but that it is the Government who must give the leadership.

Mr. Baldry: I am disappointed in the hon. Gentleman. I had hoped that rather than using words like "chaos", he too would encourage slaughterhouses, renderers, livestock marts and everyone else in the industrial chain to work together.

The hon. Gentleman has close contacts with the industry and I am sure he is aware of some of the sectoral interests at play. It is important that they all appreciate that it is in their long-term interests to work together because it is in their long-term interest to restore confidence in British beef.

I do not think there has ever been a scintilla of a suggestion that we want anything other than to develop a live test as speedily as possible. For that reason we are helping to fund considerable amounts of research on it. If we can develop a live test, no one would be more delighted than us.

The dead weight option was introduced because, as a common pattern of trading, many farmers do not take their cattle to livestock marts but go straight to the abattoirs. It was the earnest request of members of the National Farmers Union, the Country Landowners Association and others that there should be a dead weight option. We have listened to their requests and, despite stiff opposition from some of our European colleagues, who were suspicious of that option, we have succeeded in introducing it. I would very much hope that hon. Members would applaud that because it demonstrates that we are seeking to listen to the concerns of those involved and, wherever possible, to respond to them.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): May I report to my hon. Friend that beef farmers in north Yorkshire are finding it extremely difficult to get abattoirs to take cattle? They recognise, however, that my hon. Friend is aware of the urgency of the situation and they welcome his decision to get all parts of the industry together to provide a daily solution to the problem.

Does my hon. Friend agree that it sits ill on Opposition parties to criticise the 30-month slaughter scheme when they called for it, as did farmers, in the first place? Everyone knew that it would be complicated and that it will work only when everyone in the industry works together for the greater good of our beef industry.

Mr. Baldry: My hon. Friend is right. The scheme was introduced with the support of all Conservative Members after the fervent request of retailers, producers and everyone involved in the food chain. They believed that it would prove to be a substantial measure in helping to restore confidence in United Kingdom beef. Everyone must work together to ensure its success.

My hon. Friend takes a close interest in the issue and he will know only too well that one of the difficulties is that this country has a finite amount of rendering capacity, but renderers must be prepared to work with a number of abattoirs. They cannot just believe that they can work with a favoured abattoir or a couple of favoured abattoirs. That would cause considerable resentment in different parts of the country.

I have sought to ensure that the abattoirs involved in the scheme represent a wide geographical cross-section, ensuring that, if need be, farmers can take their livestock to abattoirs in a convenient location. Co-operation is needed between farmers and livestock marts on the one hand and renderers and abattoirs on the other. No Minister of any Government at any time can wet-nurse every slaughterhouse, renderer and livestock mart in the country. They must co-operate and work together to make the scheme a success.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On the issue of representations by the Highland Cattle Society, is there any special dispensation because highland cattle take longer than 30 months to mature? When the Minister meets the renderers tomorrow, will he ask them about the temperatures of the heating of food in relation to prions, which may be the root cause of the whole problem?

Mr. Baldry: On the hon. Gentleman's first point, he may well be aware that, last Friday, we issued a consultation paper on exemption schemes for breeds of cattle—such as highland and Dexter cattle—that tend to mature after 30 months. I will ensure that a copy is sent direct to the hon. Gentleman.

On the rest of the process, of course we shall ensure that rendering and every other process complies with the objectives of best science. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman and I would agree that it is imperative that we, and everyone in Europe, apply best science to what we

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do, because, if we do not work and take our decisions on the basis of best science, we might as well return to the Copernican theory of the universe.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): I compliment my hon. Friend on the way in which he communicated the details of the scheme today, but does he agree that those animals are being slaughtered—and therefore disposed of—not for any scientific reason, but apparently to restore confidence among the Europeans? Does he therefore agree that any extended scheme that might be introduced to dispose of more animals in the same way could be introduced only on the basis that the ban would be lifted? Such schemes cannot be advanced without a copper-bottomed guarantee to lift the ban that has been wrongly imposed on our products.

Mr. Baldry: My hon. Friend always makes some very good points. In fairness, this scheme was instituted because retailers, the National Farmers Union and everyone in the food chain joined together and made representations to us and expressed the view that implementing the scheme would help restore confidence in the domestic market in British beef and consequently help restore confidence in UK beef elsewhere in the world.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Minister has told the House several times that there is no suggestion of proposing any further selective cull unless it is based on best science and commands the support of the House. As I believe became clear at the last meeting of the Council of Ministers, the European Commission and European Community vets recognise and acknowledge that the scheme that my right hon. and learned Friend proposed is the best that can be devised—in other words, no one yet has been able to suggest a better scheme for a selective cull, although of course we are always prepared to listen to any further suggestions and comments that might be made.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Will the Minister be flexible in his attitude towards the various abattoirs? There is already controversy in south Cheshire about some of the choices. Is he aware that, far from the information system working efficiently, it took me nearly 24 hours on Thursday and Friday to obtain accurate information about the working of the scheme? Will he please ensure that detailed information is easily available to the people affected?

Mr. Baldry: I have sought to ensure that there is a proper coverage of abattoirs throughout the country; there is certainly adequate slaughterhouse capacity in Cheshire. If too many abattoirs are involved in the scheme, there is a danger that we may start to involve abattoirs that have been mothballed or have not had money invested in them to bring them up to EC standards, and we also increase the difficulties of marrying up abattoirs and renderers.

If, as the scheme develops, it appears that we can take on more slaughtering capacity, I am willing to consider doing so, but I am advised by the vets and many others that the current spread of abattoirs is adequate.

On the hon. Lady requiring information, I very much hope that if the hon. Lady or any other hon. Member has a problem or query in relation to the scheme, they will telephone my private office; that is what private offices are for. Otherwise I very much hope that farmers and producers will telephone the intervention board to receive assistance.

I have written to all farmers setting out the initial details of the scheme, and I am closely monitoring calls to the intervention board. If the same queries are made time and again, I shall send further information to farmers in order to deal with those persistent queries. If hon. Members have a problem or a difficult constituency case, I hope that they will contact my office immediately,

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Mid–Kent): Is my hon. Friend aware that in Maidstone we have probably the most modern, and certainly one of the most accessible, livestock markets in the country? It is outraged that it has been left out of the scheme so far. Can my hon. Friend offer any hope that, as the scheme develops, Maidstone will become a collecting point?

Mr. Baldry: The criteria for including livestock marts was that last year they dealt with either 2,000 cull cows or 2,000 clean beef cows—on average, that is 40 cows per week. If a market does not deal with at least 40 cows per week, one must question whether it is a serious player. I have said that I will re-examine the coverage of both abattoirs and livestock marts. However, I would need to be persuaded to increase the number of livestock marts, given the existing extensive coverage of collection centres.

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones (Ynys Môn): The Minister will be aware that there is concern, particularly in areas of large geographical spread such as north and mid-Wales, that his strict criteria for collection points might not always be met. It might be in the interests of the industry if the Minister were to look at specific problems in certain areas.

Abattoirs in north-west and west Wales have difficulty obtaining any support from the rendering industry. The Minister has said that he will talk to the industry immediately in the hope of reaching an agreement. If it does not agree and if no rendering facilities are available, does the Minister accept that it is purely academic to appoint abattoirs in the first place?

Mr. Baldry: Ten abattoirs in Wales are approved under the scheme and they are spread from the north to the south of the Principality. There is a fair coverage of abattoirs in Wales. It is essential that the renderers co-operate with the abattoirs in order to carry out the maximum amount of rendering. Clearly, the process is dependent upon the rendering. If the renderers do not co-operate, they may be assured that I shall be on their backs until they do. Their co-operation is essential. It is their industry as much as anyone else's, and they must have an interest in restoring long-term confidence in United Kingdom beef.

I hope that the renderers will start to co-operate fully with slaughterhouses up and down the country in order to maximise the scheme's throughput as speedily as possible. That is already occurring in Scotland and Northern Ireland. I hope that the renderers and other sectoral interests south of the border and in Wales will see that and follow their example.

Mr. David Harris (St. Ives): I thank my hon. Friend for responding quickly to the representations made by

hon. Members last week in the House and outside it about increasing the number of collection centres at markets. I am grateful that Helston has been included, but I am sorry that Penzance has not been selected so far.

By limiting the number of abattoirs to 44, Her Majesty's Government are concentrating still further the business in the hands of a few large abattoirs around the country. Will my hon. Friend re-examine the situation, as the scheme should not be used to bring about a drastic reorganisation of the slaughtering industry?

Mr. Baldry: I have received representations from those, such as vets, who argue that we should restrict abattoirs to a very small number—perhaps 20 or so—which could then be tied to individual renderers. About 200 abattoirs across the country—many of which had been in mothballs for some time—applied to join the scheme. I am seeking to ensure the maximum throughput under the scheme, having regard to the rendering capacity we have. I believe that we have achieved that, but if it transpires that we can take on further slaughter capacity, of course we shall seek to do so. I am keen that we should clear the backlog and get the maximum amount of beef processed through the scheme, not least because I want to ensure that farmers receive their compensation cheques as speedily as possible.

Mr. Tony Banks (Newham, North–West): The Minister mentioned animal welfare, which concerns me. Will he take us through the process from farm to furnace that the poor dumb creatures will have to undergo? Will he cut out the euphemisms so that we know exactly what it means? As it is pretty obvious from the past that the owners and controllers of slaughterhouses do not abide by the rules, and as the animals are not bound to the food chain, what checks will he make to ensure the highest possible standard of animal welfare? Will his vets be present and will he allow animal welfare organisations to monitor the process?

Mr. Baldry: The Meat Hygiene Service and the Government veterinary service are present throughout the slaughtering process. It goes without saying that we always want to ensure the best possible animal welfare throughout the transactions. We have to bear that in mind when we are considering how fast the 30-month scheme can work. There is no dissembling on that and, as I have made clear today to the livestock marts and the abattoirs, if at any stage there is any suggestion that livestock markets or abattoirs are failing to comply with all the regulations, they will be suspended from the scheme.

The scheme should work properly and effectively in respect of animal welfare, consumer confidence and ensuring that the rules are complied with in terms of public finance. I do not want to open a Sunday newspaper in a couple of months' time to find allegations of animal abuse or financial abuse. The scintilla of a suggestion that anyone is abusing the scheme will lead to suspension.

Mr. John Whittingdale (Colchester, South and Maldon): Will my hon. Friend give further consideration to the plight of those who were previously involved in head-boning, whose business has been wiped out overnight? Can the scheme provide any help to that part of the industry?

Mr. Baldry: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. It is not and never has been possible to give compensation to everyone who has suffered financially, either directly or indirectly, as a consequence of the announcement by the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee. The money that we have paid and are paying to abattoirs, renderers and others has been by way of market support. There is no longer a market to support in head-boning and for that reason that industry has not received and will not receive a penny in compensation. That has been made clear. I hope that others involved in the process, who sometimes feel that they may not be receiving as much money as they would like, will have regard to the fact that many elsewhere in the industry have suffered more dramatically.

Mr. Alan W. Williams (Carmarthen): Will the Minister clarify what happens to the cattle after slaughter and explain how the carcases are disposed of? He talks about rendering and incineration, but what does he mean by rendering? We all thought that, once the cattle had been slaughtered, they would then be incinerated.

Mr. Baldry: If any hon. Members do not understand the rendering process and genuinely seek a further understanding of it, of course I shall arrange for them to be given a further detailed briefing and perhaps the opportunity to visit a slaughterhouse. It is important there is a full understanding. Once the animals are rendered, they have to be disposed of and, given the scale of the exercise, we are examining means of ensuring that the carcases are disposed of in an environmentally proper and efficient way. That may well require a number of solutions that we are examining in conjunction with the Environment Agency, the Department of the Environment and others. Hon. Members can rest assured that any disposal will be to the best and highest environmental standards.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Southend, East): Can the Minister estimate the cost to public funds of the scheme, which is based on 120,000 cattle, and of the attached abolition of the Meat and Livestock Commission levy? Once those 120,000 slaughters have been completed, will that mean the possible elimination of BSE?

Mr. Baldry: My hon. Friend can do the calculation himself. I circulated to my hon. Friend and to every other right hon. and hon. Member on Friday the details of the exact compensation being paid. We have not set a fixed time limit for the scheme, which will operate as long as necessary to continue to restore confidence in UK beef. The scheme will certainly have to operate for some considerable time. Market adjustments will be made as the scheme is introduced—not least because many farmers who may have run their clean beef on to more than 30 months will now rear and sell their beef in less than 30 months. Clearly there will now be a premium price for beef of below 30 months.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): The Minister mentioned compensation to farmers. Will the Government compensate slaughterhouses for additional lairage costs, the expense of tending animals overnight and extra slaughtering costs?

Mr. Baldry: I am not sure which details the hon. Gentleman has read. Abattoirs will receive funds for

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acting as a collection centre and a payment for each animal that they slaughter, which we will negotiate. Slaughterhouses will receive a perfectly fair payment for the work they do, and the throughput of cull cows will be little different from that previous to the scheme's operation. The only change will be that, instead of slaughtered animals going into the human food chain, they will be disposed of otherwise.

I see no reason for slaughterhouses involved in the scheme to be concerned about the payments made to them. I have received no specific representations from any slaughterhouse that the payments are unfair. Abattoirs recognise that the funds that they are receiving from the public purse are perfectly fair.

Sir Donald Thompson (Calder Valley): Does my hon. Friend expect that the 30-month rule will be inviolate? Surely the period will be ratched up to 31, 32 and 33 months, as scientific knowledge moves on.

Mr. Baldry: The 30-month rule was chosen because SEAC thought that the time limit was important, which was why the National Farmers Union, the Food and Drink Federation, the British Retail Consortium and others unanimously recommended to the Government that the 30-month cull scheme would make a substantial contribution to restoring consumer confidence in UK beef here and overseas—and we have implemented one.

Mrs. Ray Michie (Argyll and Bute): The National Farmers Union of Scotland sent me a list of live weight collection centres serving remote locations in Scotland, but it does not include the island of Islay or Campbeltown in my constituency. Will the Minister give serious consideration to including those remote places?

Mr. Baldry: As I made clear to the livestock marts this morning, I do not pretend to have perfect wisdom or to offer perfect coverage. If any right hon. or hon. Member feels that there are particular geographical reasons for including another livestock mart, of course I will consider them. Marts must be able to find adequate and proper slaughtering capacity. I am loth to increase substantially the number of livestock marts because the greater the number involved, the bigger is the danger that the scheme will become complicated in respect of the number of abattoirs. It seems to me, as a general rule, that if a livestock mart was not processing 40 cull cows a week before the scheme's general introduction, it was not a serious player.

Sir Michael Spicer (South Worcestershire): Why will the European Union's financial contribution to the scheme be set against the general rebate that we receive from the European Union when the two issues are completely separate?

Mr. Baldry: My hon. Friend knows that the rules on European finance apply to this scheme and to every other scheme under which the United Kingdom is a beneficiary of the European Community budget. This scheme is no different from any other under which we receive money from the European Union.

Mr. Nick Ainger (Pembroke): Does the Minister accept that his statement leaves in limbo those farmers who produce slower maturing cattle? Can the Minister clearly say today that, in principle, those slower maturing breeds will get an extension beyond 30 months and that the consultation is merely about practicalities, not about principle? We do not know how long the consultation period will be, and perhaps the Minister can tell us. Otherwise, those farmers will not know whether to put their beasts into the scheme now or to wait for the final announcement.

Mr. Baldry: Again, I shall ensure that the hon. Gentleman gets a copy of the consultation paper. If his constituents who are concerned read the criteria in the consultation paper, they will get a clear indication. The consultation period is as short as we can humanly make it. It is 14 days, and I hope that the industry will respond during that time and that decisions can be made speedily afterwards. It is important to have a consultation period, not least because we have to persuade our Community partners and others that the exemptions should be allowed and should stick.

Mr. George Foulkes (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley): Does not the Minister realise that the farmers, certainly those to whom I have spoken in my constituency over the weekend, are criticising not the scheme but the failure of the Government to have in place anything to implement that scheme when it was supposed to start? That is typical of the lack of a coherent strategy from or any assessment of the implications by the Government, as we saw when the Secretary of State for Health made the original announcement and as we see in the negotiations in Brussels.

Has the Minister made any assessment of the implications of the scheme that he has announced on the displacement of cattle that might otherwise have been slaughtered in the slaughterhouses? Has he made any general assessment of whether the scheme will ensure that some of the people who have lost their jobs in the past six weeks will return to employment and receive an income, which they have not had for six weeks?

Mr. Baldry: It is self-evident to all of us—every hon. Member who has a farming constituency is in touch with farmers—that farmers are concerned to know when their cattle can be taken and culled, not least—and quite reasonably—because they want their compensation cheques. The farmers, like everyone, have to recognise that there is a backlog of around 150,000 cattle and that not all of those can be culled tomorrow or this coming week. There will have to be some forbearance as renderers, slaughterhouses and livestock marts work together with the farmers to bring forward livestock on an orderly basis.

As the scheme moves forward, clearly the number of cull cows will be the same as always. They will be slaughtered and, instead of entering the human food chain, they will be disposed of otherwise. The amount of clean beef will not be significantly reduced, so the volume of work carried out by the slaughterhouses will not be different from that carried out previously. The work will just be done in different ways. I see no reason why, in some slaughterhouses, there will not be more jobs as a consequence. I suspect that we will also see renderers taking on extra employees. In Scotland, there is only one renderer and I am sure it will take on extra staff to cope with the extra demand from the industry.

Elderly (Long-term Care)

4.8 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Stephen Dorrell): With permission, Madam Speaker, I should like to make a statement about the consultation document, which I am publishing today, setting out the Government's proposals to improve our arrangements for care in old age.

Older people represent the fastest growing section of the community. The proportion of the population aged 75 and over has risen from 4.7 per cent. 25 years ago to 7.1 per cent. today. The figures for those over 85 are even more dramatic: the proportion has doubled from 0.9 per cent. 25 years ago to 1.8 per cent. of the population today.

It is fashionable to regard those trends as a problem that requires a solution. The Government are more optimistic. We unreservedly welcome the fact that medical and social advance allows us to live longer and fitter lives. It requires a particularly perverse nature to regard the prospect of improved life expectancy and improved quality of life as anything other than good news.

But even good news has to be planned for. As life expectancy increases, it becomes progressively more important to ensure that sufficient provision is made to enable retired people to enjoy a comfortable and fulfilling retirement.

The Government believe that the principal responsibility for making that provision must rest with the individual citizen. That is why we have developed a wide range of incentives to encourage people to save for their needs in later life. New rights and flexibilities have been introduced into pension schemes. Savings products, such as tax-exempt special savings accounts and pensioner income bonds, have been developed or made more attractive to encourage people to save during their working lives and provide for their needs during retirement.

There is, however, one cost that can have a dramatic effect on the finances of elderly people, and for which they have often not made specific provision. It is estimated that roughly one in five people who reach retirement age will eventually need long-term residential care, which can cost up to £20,000 per annum or, in some cases, even more. Costs on that scale cause real concern to elderly people and to their families. Furthermore, that worry is compounded by uncertainty, as no individual can be certain either whether they will need residential care or for how long they will need it. The open-ended nature of the potential commitment is a particular source of concern.

Against that background, the Government believe that it is important to provide a framework of support to allow individual citizens to plan their affairs against a more stable background. That framework must balance two objectives.

First, it must continue to offer targeted support to those elderly people who are not able to meet the full cost of their care for themselves. Secondly, it must recognise the contribution of those who do make provision specifically to meet their own needs and ensure that those people secure proper reward for their thrift and responsibility.

The existing arrangements have made possible an unprecedented improvement in provision for the care of elderly people, but they are widely perceived to impose an unfairly onerous burden on those elderly people who do make a contribution to their own care costs.

The Government are determined to address that concern. Last month we changed the rules of the means test, which is used by local authorities to determine entitlement to assistance with residential care costs. We increased from £3,000 to £10,000 the amount of capital that is fully disregarded, and provided for half a resident's occupational pension to be disregarded when he or she has a spouse at home. But we want to do more. The consultation document that I am publishing today therefore offers three new elements in the framework of support.

My first proposal concerns those still in work. Almost 11 million people of working age are members of occupational pension schemes and about 10 million people belong to personal pension schemes. Funded pension provision in Britain is more advanced than in any other European Union country, and it is the financial strength of the United Kingdom pension sector that provides the best assurance to the working population that their financial needs in retirement will be met. The Government believe that there are some significant ways in which pension schemes can help individual citizens to meet their long-term care needs. The Government are therefore seeking views on the possibility that pension schemes could offer variable pensions that involve a smaller initial payment in return for a larger payment later on. We believe that that change would be of considerable benefit to elderly people using their pension funds to help with the cost of long-term care.

My second proposal involves those who are at the end of their working lives and are planning their financial arrangements during retirement. In making their plans they need to make provision for the possibility that they will need residential care, but they will be anxious to safeguard their savings, and often the value of their family home as well. The Government therefore believe that it makes sense both to the individual and to the taxpayer to offer those people a partnership. To the extent that the retired person insures the risk that they will need long-term care, the taxpayer will give extra protection to the assets of the retired person. The consultation document offers two alternative formulations, both of which would have the effect of protecting the assets of those in residential care by an amount related to the value of the insurance policy that they take out.

My third proposal concerns those who are at the point of entering long-term residential care, or are already receiving it. At that point in their lives, it is either certain or very likely that they will need long-term care, but a substantial question mark remains over how long they will need it for. Again, it makes sense to both the individual and the taxpayer to offer a partnership that protects the assets of retired people by an amount that is related to the value of an annuity that they purchase on entering care. The annuity offers the elderly person certainty by providing a commitment to pay a stated amount for as long as he or she needs to fund his or her own care. The consultation document invites views about the level of asset protection that should be available to holders of that type of immediate-needs annuity.

[Mr. Stephen Dorrell]

In considering both insurance and annuity products, the Government think it important for the value of the asset protection available to retired people to be related to the value of the policy that they buy. The consultation document sets out more than one option for establishing the relationship, but it does not suggest that purchase of a policy should exempt a retired person from the means test. The reason for that is important. Total exemption could be linked only to an insurance policy or annuity that passed a minimum threshold of value. The result would be to remove any incentive to provide for themselves from those who were not able to afford total exemption. The Government think it important to provide encouragement to save for old age right across the income scale; we are therefore not attracted to a scheme that we believe would discriminate against less-well-off people.

Expenditure by social services departments on the care of elderly people has been one of the fastest-growing commitments of the taxpayer over the past 17 years. In 1979, the figure stood at approximately £1.5 billion in today's values. Expenditure last year was approximately £3.4 billion, to which must be added £1.5 billion of expenditure by the DSS on residential care for the elderly. That makes a total of £4.9 billion—an average annual increase in real terms of more than 7 per cent. every year for the last 17 years. No one can say that this Government are not committed to providing proper social care for elderly people.

Today's announcements make it clear that that commitment continues. We offer a partnership to elderly people and their families. We shall continue to provide a safety net. In addition, we shall ensure that a proper framework is in place to encourage people to provide for themselves, and protect the interests of those who do. That is the proper basis for a free society, and I commend it to the House.

Ms Harriet Harman (Peckham): The consultation document claims to be about partnership, but is it not clear from the statement that it is about the individual taking over responsibility? The Secretary of State says that

"the principal responsibility for making . . . provision"

for care in old age

"must rest with the individual".

He says that the Government's role is now nothing more than "a safety net". That is a betrayal. No one told today's elderly that their care was to be their responsibility. No one told them that the welfare state would be only a safety net for them. They were promised care from the cradle to the grave, and that promise has now been broken.

The consultation paper fails to provide the solution to a problem that the Government have created. Will the Secretary of State admit that the lack of proper provision for long-term care has caused an epidemic of insecurity among old people, and that 40,000 people every year must sell the family home to pay for nursing care? Will the Secretary of State also admit that the problem has not been caused by the growing number of elderly people? That steady increase has been known about for many years. The problem is the Government's failure to make proper plans for the care of the elderly. In fact, far from planning for their care, the Government have cut NHS nursing care for the elderly.

Will the Secretary of State confirm that, since 1988, the number of people aged over 75 has remained steady? Will he also confirm that, over that period, the Government have cut the number of NHS continuing care beds by a third from 51,000 to 34,000? Is that not where the care gap has come from? Elderly people have been asked to pay for that care gap, and today they are being asked to pay more—a minimum of £10,000 a pensioner couple when they retire, according to the Government's figures. Today's announcement will be seen as a new Tory tax—a tax on the elderly and a tax on home owners. The Government are saying to elderly couples, "Pay up £10,000 or more or lose your home if you need long-term nursing care."

The £10,000 plan will not solve the problem. Will the Secretary of State admit that, even in America, where people are used to insuring themselves for health and social care, very few people take out insurance for long-term nursing care because it asks them to pay most when they can least afford it—when they are retiring?

What about those who own their own home but do not have £10,000 to spare? What about people who do not own their own home? Will the Secretary of State confirm that, according to the National Association of Pension Funds Ltd., only a minority of people who have an occupational pension would be able to afford to reduce their annual pension to pay for long-term care? Do we not need to pay much more attention to people who need nursing care but who could, with a little extra help, stay in their own homes? What about people in hospital who need short-term residential nursing care to help them get better, not long-term care for the rest of their lives? The right hon. Gentleman's proposals do not provide answers to those questions.

Does the Secretary of State recognise that the Government's short-term, piecemeal approach, in which the consultation document is another step, will not work? We need a royal commission to involve all those concerned in the broad range of social security and health service issues. What people want is the ability to sit down together as a family and plan. They cannot do that now. They want a choice of options for care in their old age. They do not have that now. Above all, they want security. Thanks to the Government, they certainly do not have that now.

Will the Secretary of State act on the Health Select Committee's call for national eligibility criteria for continuing care to end the current lottery, whereby the care that people receive and the price that they pay depends on where they live? Will he admit that the shortage of convalescent and rehabilitation care means that too many people are denied the chance of independence? The reason why today's announcement fails to address the real issues about reforming long-term care is that it is not a serious attempt to rescue the elderly from fear and insecurity—it is merely the Government's attempt to rescue themselves from electoral defeat.

Mr. Dorrell: This is an extraordinary example—the second in a week—of Labour's Front-Bench team not being able to work out its own line. On the lunchtime television news, an argument was going on between the hon. Lady and her hon. Friend the Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Mr. Smith). In the House this afternoon, the hon. Lady has again described the proposals as a betrayal. On the lunchtime television news, the hon. Gentleman said:

"Well, I have no particular objection to the basic idea."

The hon. Lady said at lunchtime that the proposals were a tax on being old and on being a home owner; the hon. Gentleman had no particular objection to the basic idea.

Opposition Front-Bench spokesmen really should work out their lines before they go public on a television screen or in the House of Commons. When the hon. Gentleman goes to see his hon. Friend the Member for Peckham (Ms Harman), perhaps he will explain to her the difference that she glossed over this afternoon between social care and health care. She led the House to believe that she does not understand that, since 1948, there has been a difference in the funding arrangements for social care, under which support has been means-tested since 1948, and the funding arrangements for health care, which have been a universal, largely free service since 1948. They remain exactly that.

The hon. Member for Peckham talked about the decline in bed space in the national health service. She is right. The House will be interested in the figures. The figures that she quoted are not precisely the ones that I have in front of me, but they are near enough. The number of NHS beds for care of the elderly fell from 55,000 in 1979 to 37,000 in 1995—a reduction of about 18,000. What she did not tell the House was that, in the same period, spaces in residential homes—75 per cent. of which are supported out of public funds—increased from 32,000 to 167,000, or that nursing home spaces increased from fewer than 20,000 to 155,000.

The hon. Lady did not mention the fact that, as I said in my statement, there had been a 7 per cent. per annum real terms growth in public funding for care of the elderly since 1979. It is simply a travesty of the truth to represent that policy as undermining care of the elderly. In the past 17 years there has been an unprecedented growth in the public funds available to support elderly people.

The hon. Member for Peckham went on to peddle the myth—here the hon. Member for Islington, South and Finsbury was just as guilty as she was—that the Government's proposals were linked to a £10,000 charge to elderly people. She might like to turn to example 1 at paragraph 9.22 of the document. I do not ask her to go through all the examples, but simply to look at example 1, which makes it clear that the charge is £5,000 to protect a £60,000 house—£5,000, not £10,000. The more important point is that, as I said clearly in my statement, there is no minimum qualifying amount. Any couples or individuals who have savings or assets that they want to protect can benefit from the scheme. It is simply not true to say that there is a minimum qualifying amount.

Anyone listening to the response of the hon. Member for Peckham would have been hard put to recognise the proposition that in this paper the Government are offering the terms on which the means test will be made more generous to allow more public support to go to those who have provided for themselves in old age. The core idea in the statement is that, in addition to continuing to provide the safety net that has been available and has been developed since 1979, we shall also provide support to those who provide for their own needs. I believe that that is right.

The hon. Member for Peckham concluded with a commitment to a royal commission. It is the saying of a politician who has no ideas. It is one of those great sayings of history: "The cheque is in the post, leave it to a royal commission." That is the hon. Lady's standard of policy-making.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: May we now have brief exchanges—brief questions and brief answers? A number of hon. Members want to ask questions.

Mr. Nigel Forman (Carshalton and Wallington): The three proposals in my right hon. Friend's statement are significant steps forward in a difficult area and I congratulate him on that. In financing them, does he recognise that there is bound to a partnership between the general taxpayer and the families of those who need the care? Will explain a little more fully how that can be carried forward?

Mr. Dorrell: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's welcome for the document, and I agree about the need for partnership. As I have stressed, the key concern must be to continue to provide the safety net for those who cannot provide for themselves while offering a fair arrangement of partnership between public and private sector for those who can and do save for their old age. Those people have been disadvantaged by the system over the past few years and we offer them targeted assistance in the document.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): It is welcome that the Government have made some proposals because there is much uncertainty and concern about future provision, but I am nervous about the timetable because important work, such as the Select Committee's report and some valuable work by the Rowntree Foundation, will become available in the next few months. The consultation period is only four or five weeks, which is too short. I am concerned about the amount of money involved and whether the scheme will effectively be available to people on ordinary incomes. Example 1 on page 35, to which the right hon. Gentleman referred a moment ago, talks about insurance that would pay out £7,500 a year. What premium would have to be paid to get such a return?

Mr. Dorrell: The example in paragraph 9.21 that I cited would involve a cost of £7,500 to provide cover for the rest of the life of the individual. If that person wanted only to protect a £60,000 house—the detail is set out in paragraph 9.22—the single premium would be £5,000. However, the important point is that people who want to protect smaller sums, either because—as the hon. Member for Peckham rightly said—they are not home owners and want to protect a cash nest-egg or because their houses are not worth £60,000, have that option under the proposals. There is no minimum qualifying amount and nor should there be, because it is my purpose to encourage all sections of the community to save to provide something to help them in their old age and to give people a reward when they do so.

Mr. Warren Hawksley (Halesowen and Stourbridge): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his consultation document—it is a move in the right direction and it is right that the problems of financing care should be tackled. I have two points. First, will he develop the further stages of the process and the timing of that?

[Mr. Warren Hawksley]

Secondly, I hope that he will be able to give my constituents an assurance that they will have a choice between council and private facilities in spending the money. Dudley's Labour council claims to be under financial restrictions under care in the community and blames the Government. It has decided to fill its own homes rather than to give the private sector a chance to provide the service. Private homes are often better and cheaper for the taxpayer. Will he assure us that it is a bad use of taxpayers' money to spend more for worse homes, and will he say what he is going to do about it?

Mr. Dorrell: My hon. Friend's second point is important and runs much wider than this issue. It is important to encourage social service departments that are responsible for making decisions about where people go into care to consider honestly the costs and benefits of particular forms of care and not to bias their decisions in favour of their own protected public authority sector. I agree about that, and I give him a complete assurance that, because the money paid out of the insurance and annuity schemes will be the insured person's money, people will be free to use those resources in the home of their choice.

On my hon. Friend's first question about the timetable, the document makes it clear that we intend to make it possible for people to take advantage of the schemes during 1997. As primary legislation is required, he can draw his own conclusions from that commitment.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): As the introduction of a new national insurance care pension would have rewarded everyone who works hard and saves, will the Secretary of State say what consideration he gave to that proposal, as opposed to the partial proposals that he has talked about today?

Mr. Dorrell: I prefer to encourage voluntary contributions—encouraging people to recognise their responsibilities without the use of compulsion, which makes the contributions largely indistinguishable from a form of taxation. I prefer the voluntary approach, and the document makes it abundantly clear that that is the Government's policy. We considered both approaches and opted, as a matter of conscious choice, for the voluntary one.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Hastings and Rye): Does my right hon. Friend accept that many of my constituents will welcome the proposals, particularly his assurance that they will be introduced during 1997? Does he also accept that a number of them will not be able to avail themselves of the proposals and will therefore suffer the problems with social services that have been described? When does he expect to break the hegemony of social services by breaking up their role as judge, jury, prosecutor and inspector?

Mr. Dorrell: My hon. Friend may be interested to know that I announced 10 days ago a series of reviews into the value for money being secured by social service departments. The social service sector is the fourth and often not commented on arm of the welfare state. It is responsible for substantial public expenditure and it is right that the manner and value of that decision-making process should be subject to proper public audit. I announced a series of proposals to secure that in a speech to the Association of Directors of Social Services roughly 10 days ago.

Mr. Alfred Morris (Manchester, Wythenshawe): What can the proposals do for the more than 40,000 elderly people who have had their homes sold over the heads, in the last year alone, to pay for long-term care? What will they do for their caring relatives, mainly women, again in their tens of thousands, who, after many years of caring for an elderly parent, now find that they have lost their inheritance? Does the Secretary of State recall that it was the plight of caring relatives and their deep sense of injustice that brought this issue to the boil, not only across middle England but all across this country?

Mr. Dorrell: I share the right hon. Gentleman's impatience to get these proposals in place so that we can prevent that process from continuing. I simply invite him to address his comments to Labour Front Benchers, who are prepared to appoint a royal commission to examine the subject further before they will tell us what they would do about it.

Mr. Douglas French (Gloucester): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on these creative and positive proposals. They will be a great comfort to the elderly and are not at all as the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Peckham (Ms Harman), portrayed them. Does he recognise, however, that insurance companies will need to respond positively and helpfully, which I am sure they stand ready to do, to introduce new products and compliance procedures and to ensure that their product design is correct and produces for purchasers what they believe they will get? Will he give as much attention as possible to the consultation process and consider the publication of draft clauses before the legislation comes before the House to ensure that all the details are properly ironed out?

Mr. Dorrell: I can certainly give my hon. Friend the absolute assurance that we shall work closely with the industry and other interested parties to ensure that the issues are fully thought through and ironed out before the legislation is introduced. I will think about my hon. Friend's suggestion on draft clauses. We have already had informal contact with the industry, and we shall continue that with it and other interested parties. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his welcome and entirely agree with the stress that he places on the need to ensure that we proceed in a proper and open consultative way.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Is not the truth that what the Secretary of State is up to is a big confidence trick on the elderly? On the one hand is someone with emphysema, who is riddled with disease and has to go to hospital incessantly for perhaps five or 10 years in the latter period of his life and, on the other, those with Alzheimer's disease who see their homes being taken away from them. Under this scheme, all those people who are affected will not get a penny piece. As for this insurance scam, the only people who will make big profits are the friends of the Tory party among the insurance companies. One thing is certain and I do not know

whether the right hon. Gentleman has ever thought about this, but people ought to understand it—do not buy your council house under the Tories, or you might lose it.

Mr. Dorrell: That was yet another example of the catholic views of the modern Labour party. While Labour Front Benchers are busy trying to reassure those who operate in the market that they understand how the market works and that they benefit from the free-enterprise system, the hon. Gentleman remains the authentic voice of the traditional Labour party—which, whenever a public-private partnership is proposed, can think only of the profits of the private partner. The vast majority of elderly people will feel that, at last, there is a clear route forward. They will draw a sharp contrast between that clear route forward and the fog on offer from the hon. Gentleman and from his hon. Friend—if he is happy to call her that—the Member for Peckham.

Mr. David Martin (Portsmouth, South): I welcome my right hon. Friend's imaginative proposals, in particular his highlighting of the contribution made by private rest and nursing homes to the long-term care of the elderly in Portsmouth and elsewhere—the same nursing homes against which the Labour party continues to have a vendetta. Will he, please, state specifically that he intends that there should be legislation in this year's Queen's Speech so that the proposals produced at the end of the consultation period can be put into legislation as soon as possible?

Mr. Dorrell: There are niceties to the specific commitment in the terms that my hon. Friend asks for, but I have given the clear commitment to introduce legislation during 1997. I invite him to draw the same conclusions about the implications of that commitment as I asked my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Stourbridge (Mr. Hawksley) to draw a moment or two ago.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): The distinction between social and health care is entirely artificial for my constituents, who are having to sell their homes to pay for long-term nursing care. It has, sadly, become the accepted wisdom that the taxpayer can no longer afford the welfare state from cradle to grave, yet as citizens we are told that we can afford premiums of up to £10,000, or—according to Private Patients' Plan, which has operated the blueprint for this consultation—monthly premiums of £70. In the wings, of course, we have the insurance companies, waiting to cream the profits. This week in *The Independent on Sunday*, insurance companies told us that they pay out only 70p for every pound that they collect.

Why does not the Secretary of State offer the people of this country the choice that a majority of them want: to pay for their health care through national insurance or the tax system? In the end, the premiums will be a damn sight cheaper than the costs listed in these booklets or in his consultation document.

Mr. Dorrell: The hon. Lady and her colleagues on the Labour Front Bench have to come clean. If they are in favour of universal provision of social care, they should say that that is their policy—it is the policy of the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner)—which will cost an extra £4 billion of public expenditure. Is that their policy? If it is not, they must not mislead the public that that is the direction in which they are going.

Mr. John Butcher (Coventry, South-West): I congratulate my right hon. Friend. May I warn him—perhaps he does not need any warning—that he is dealing here with a very emotional issue, which, if misrepresented or distorted, could cause a great deal of distress? Will he therefore spend a great deal of time on television and radio over the next three to four hours? If the hon. Member for Peckham (Ms Harman) runs true to form, she will spend that time frightening the daylights out of elderly people.

I also tell my right hon. Friend that, in addition to the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), many of us are curious about the cost-effectiveness and quality of life implications of offering incentives, either through the taxation system or through cash, to relatives who wish to care for their elderly relatives up until the very last moment—the point at which 100 per cent. nursing care is required. That may save money and help the elderly to stay in their homes for longer.

Has my right hon. Friend seen the very interesting and somewhat destabilising research that shows that nicotine, as a drug, can prevent the onset of senile dementia? Does that not raise some rather interesting ethical and life style questions for the elderly?

Mr. Dorrell: I am not proposing to offer any scientific advice on any subject today. The advice is clear: smoking is bad for health. That advice appears in different forms on every cigarette packet. The hon. Member for Peckham can relax about that. I shall be interested to examine evidence that my hon. Friend may wish to send, but, for the moment, scientists' advice is very clear about the health effects of smoking.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that, if the hon. Member for Peckham runs true to form, she will be looking for means of scaring people. She thinks that she has already found that means because she has latched on to the idea that this is a £10,000 bill, but the proposals make it explicitly clear that there is no minimum amount and that any family with any amount of savings that they wish to protect can benefit from the provisions of this scheme. She will be misleading the public if she continues to return to that figure.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): Does the Minister realise that a large proportion of the widows in my constituency do not have £5,000 with which to buy an annuity? Will he clarify one point that has not been touched on—the position of those who are under 65 but who have been hit by strokes or by other disabling conditions? Are they brought into the provisions or not? There does not appear to be very much reference to them.

Mr. Dorrell: The answer to the hon. Gentleman's second question is yes, there is no age-qualification bar to the proposals.

On his first point, he is precisely right. That is why I have set my face against proposals that offer partnership only to those who can afford to buy total exemption. I am determined that that product should be available to all

[Mr. Dorrell]

people with savings that they want to protect, however small. Any attempt by any politician to mislead the public about that matter is blatantly dishonest.

Mr. Nigel Spearing (Newham, South): Does the Secretary of State for Health agree that health care for the frail aged, whether in home or at home, is but a section of the much broader post-war solution that we thought we had for social security as a whole? Does he agree that his Government cannot deliver that security when their policies are, unfortunately, delivering greater insecurity of employment, greater insecurity of income and even greater insecurities for existing homes for the frail and elderly, such as the Sally Sherman home in Newham? How can we place confidence in a scheme for old age that increases the participation of the City and the use of premiums when, in fact, the Government cannot deliver security now?

Mr. Dorrell: The hon. Gentleman has asked a very wide-ranging question. I pause simply to observe that security of employment and job prospects are better here than they are in any other major European Union country, because our economy is working more efficiently than most comparators elsewhere in Europe. As for his point about the welfare state and its structure, he must recognise that there is a difference between health and education—the two elements of the post-war welfare state—which are provided on a universal basis to a high standard and are largely free to those who need them. That is the commitment that this Government honour on health and education.

In the rest of the welfare state—through social security, social services and housing—ever since the war the commitment has been different. The commitment has been to a safety net to ensure that no one has an unacceptably low standard, but to encourage the individual to improve on that minimum. That is the basis of the post-war welfare state, which is respected by these proposals but which is called into question by some of the questions from Opposition Members.

Mr. Jeff Rooker (Birmingham, Perry Barr): There is a well-known reluctance among people to plan for strokes, for the onset of Parkinson's disease or for other such illnesses. We will all get old, but most people do not expect those illnesses to happen to them. Ordinary, normal, rational and logical people sometimes refuse even to make a will for that reason, later landing their loved ones with horrendous problems. It is a major difficulty.

I ask the Secretary of State to consider how the House legislated in the past to force on people one of two pensions—the state earnings-related pension scheme or an occupational pension—on top of the state pension, because people are reluctant to plan and save for a pension. The House had to do that, with a degree of consensus, because it was the only way in which we could ensure that people avoided dropping through the safety net. There should be an element of that in this scheme, because some people will refuse to take up such a scheme on the basis that it will never happen to them—or they refuse to think about it at all.

Does the Secretary of State maintain that there was a golden age of NHS long-term care? There was not. There were long-stay geriatric wards—with 20 to 30 beds in a ward—where families, if they could, dumped their elderly relatives so that they could get their hands on their relative's house. The quality of care for our constituents' parents was abysmal. Now, the majority of people can, if they wish, stay in small wards, and the majority stay in single rooms. The quality of care is now vastly superior to what it was. I do not make a distinction between the public and private sector when I say that, but we must not lead people to believe that there was a golden age of long-term NHS care as opposed to other forms of care—that would be to set out a false prospectus.

Mr. Dorrell: The hon. Gentleman is powerfully right, and I refer his colleagues to his final remark. I should like to add one further element to what he said about the supposed golden age on which people look back. In addition to the people who received poor care in NHS geriatric hospitals, many tens of thousands could not find care either in such hospitals or in part III accommodation run by local authorities. That waiting list has been abolished by the changes introduced over the past 17 years.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. We must now move on; I am sure that we shall return to this matter.

Representation of the People (Amendment)

4.50 pm

Mr. Spencer Batiste (Elmet): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to fix the maximum number of Members of the House of Commons at five hundred.

For years, we politicians have been exhorting British industry to increase its productivity, which it has done with spectacular success. We are reducing the size of the civil service to cut the cost of the state to the taxpayer; we have cut whole tiers from local government and the national health service; and we are pressing councils and schools to make themselves more cost-effective. We were absolutely right in all that, but there comes a time when we also have to lead by example.

We all know that there are far more Members of Parliament than is necessary or desirable and, as a consequence, there are more Ministers, more parliamentary private secretaries and more Opposition Front Benchers than we really need. We should have the courage of our convictions and commit ourselves to a substantial reduction in our own numbers.

Before the war, membership of the House was stable at 615, but since 1950 there has been a slow but inexorable rise in the number of Members of Parliament, from 625 to 630 to 635 to the current 651. Indeed, as a result of the current boundary review, our numbers after the next general election will be swelled by a further eight Members, making a total of 659. Rules 5 and 6 of the Boundary Commission permit such increases for geographical or demographic reasons and, by their very nature, encourage continued expansion. We have accepted this conventional wisdom without asking whether it is necessary or whether there are better alternatives. As a consequence, an already oversized House of Commons is growing without contemporary strategic judgment ever further beyond its already overstretched capacity.

Of course, new buildings can be provided for Members of Parliament and their staffs, although being in Westminster they are inevitably very expensive. However, if we reduce the number of Members of Parliament to 500, as I propose, we shall not need new buildings—indeed, we could probably sell some, as well as saving the cost of 159 Members, their staffs and their support infrastructure. That could mean the saving of millions of pounds in revenue and capital. A substantial saving could be made to the public purse, with an increase in the resources available to support the remaining Members of Parliament in the better performance of their jobs. That is what productivity and value for money are all about. We at Westminster should be no more immune to that process than industry, the civil service or local government.

Some journalists and Opposition Members clearly find my proposal strange. With a cynicism that is, sadly, as familiar as it is misplaced, they argue that turkeys would not vote for Christmas. Certainly, when I proposed a similar Bill last year, the Labour party spoke against it and defeated it. This year, we shall see.

In a recent Harris poll, 60 per cent. of those Members of Parliament who were asked said that they considered 659 to be too many, and a reduction to between 450 and 550 was the most popular solution. In a debate last summer on the Boundary Commission, Members from all parties called for a reduction in the number of Members of Parliament. The former Speaker, now Lord Weatherill, has argued in the media for large reductions, and the Father of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath) is, as ever, more radical than most and suggested only a few weeks ago that the number should be halved.

Such support for change is not surprising when we consider the overwhelming evidence in favour of it. Let us compare the House of Commons with comparable overseas legislatures. The United States, with a population five times our own, manages with 100 Senators and 435 members of the House of Representatives. Japan, with more than twice our population, has only 511 Members of Parliament. In Europe, only Germany has more Members of Parliament than we have—and then only three more—although its population is 23 million greater than ours. France, whose population is nearly identical to ours, has 82 fewer Members of Parliament. Surely we can manage with fewer than 659—there is no magic in that number.

What would be the advantages of reducing our numbers? The first and most apparent advantage is that we would send a signal to people across the country that we are committed to productivity and an example of how to achieve it. The second is that we can save money for the taxpayer. The amount saved may not be enormous, but its impact on public attitudes would be.

The third advantage is that there would be more space for Members of Parliament to do their job, by which I mean not only physical space in the House but the opportunity to participate more in prime time parliamentary proceedings. How often do we try to speak in a debate or ask a question that we believe is of great importance to our constituents but are not called? Indeed, how many Members now in the Chamber tried unsuccessfully to ask a question on the statement a few moments ago? If there were fewer Members of Parliament, we would have a greater opportunity to represent our constituents in that way.

The fourth advantage is that, even after making savings in public expenditure, there would still be enough money to provide more resources for the support of Members in their constituencies and at Westminster and to develop our information technology systems more rapidly.

Last, but by no means least, the electorate might be a little less cynical about our pay if we accepted for ourselves the redundancies that elsewhere have underpinned non-inflationary pay increases.

Some Members may feel that their work load is heavy enough, with an average of just over 69,000 constituents. Adding the demands of 19,000 voters may seem excessive but, with extra staff, an average constituency of nearly 88,000 can be as well and possibly better serviced. After all, 19 of our colleagues already have constituencies that are larger than that and have coped even without extra staff. My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Field) has 101,391 constituents and wants to keep them all.

Another important by-product and beneficial consequence of the Bill is that it would address and correct an unfair imbalance in the size of constituencies across the United Kingdom. I have raised this matter in the House before. It cannot be right that the average constituency in England contains 69,534 electors, while

[Mr. Spencer Batiste]

the average constituency in Scotland has only 54,571. That situation has arisen because of the House of Commons (Redistribution of Seats) Act 1958 which, for no obvious reason, provided a minimum number of seats for Scotland and Wales, irrespective of subsequent population changes. That democratic deficit means that Glasgow has 11 Members of Parliament while Leeds only eight even though Leeds has a larger electorate.

The simple solution is to return to the pre-1958 position of a common electoral quota for the whole of the United Kingdom. Combined with that, the reduction to 500 Members of Parliament would produce an average constituency with an electoral quota of 87,792 voters which, I believe, is perfectly viable. Leeds and Glasgow would then have six Members of Parliament each, which would be fair. The existing rules on community of interest in setting precise boundaries should be retained in full, and I propose to allow extra flexibility to assist that. I believe that an allowance of plus or minus 10 per cent. of the electoral quota will be more than adequate.

I accept that there may be a need for some exceptions. I recognise that in some sparsely populated areas of the country there would be enormous physical constituencies if they had to accommodate the full quota of constituents. There are also areas with large and cohesive communities that are not big enough for two constituencies and do not want to be split—for example, the Isle of Wight. In exceptional circumstances, I would allow the Boundary Commission discretion to create up to 10 constituencies outside the permitted range.

Clearly, my Bill will have a powerful impact on hon. Members—I am, after all, proposing a reduction of almost 30 per cent. in the number of Members of Parliament. Even after allowing for the normal retirements at elections, there will inevitably be redundancies. I believe that this change is vital for the health of the mother of Parliaments, for our country and for the restoration of public confidence in our national institutions. There is a need for constitutional reform and it should start in the House of Commons. I commend my Bill to the House.

5 pm

Mr. John Butcher (Coventry, South–West): I oppose the Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet (Mr. Batiste) on the grounds that it does not go far enough. I believe that Members of Parliament should have wider responsibilities, but that we should be less productive of clutter. I declare some form of interest in that 18 months ago I signalled that I will be retiring from the House. Therefore, any comments that I make in relation to the number of Members of Parliament or their salaries will be of a somewhat more distant nature than they might have been. I would, however, be a recipient of the side benefits in the form of an increased pension.

Having cleared that issue with hon. Members, I argue—as animal rights activists sometimes do—that when free-roaming mammals are crowded together in artificial and crowded circumstances it often produces some pretty unhealthy by-products. It is my judgment that the House is getting more and more fevered and therefore demands a culling programme.

I believe that it would be appropriate for there to be 300 Members of Parliament. This raises serious questions. There is an intimate relationship—indeed, a unique relationship—between a Member of Parliament and his constituents, and it is beneficial to the workings of the House. I believe that Members of Parliament could represent 140,000 voters—which would mean approximately 180,000 souls. Members of Parliament would need to spend far more time in their constituencies in surgery work, but they now have the back-up to do so.

As things stand, we are productive of clutter in the House and we tend to generate ephemera far more than we should. One has only to look at the Order Paper to see the immense cost of the wide variety of hobby horses being ridden by hon. Members. I oppose the Bill because I want to increase the status of Members of Parliament. It is our job to represent our constituencies in Westminster, just as much as it is to represent Westminster in our constituencies. However, we should focus on the broader issues where possible—the issues that affect millions of people when it comes to policy formulation and criticism.

Larger constituencies would mean more balanced constituencies—they would probably have a wider cross-section of income and socio-economic groups. In my view, Members of Parliament would regain some of the status that we appear to have lost over recent years. I hope that my hon. Friend does not mind my opposing his Bill—on grounds that I hope he finds more positive than negative.

Question put, pursuant to Standing Order No. 19 (Motions for leave to bring in Bills and nomination of Select Committees at commencement of public business), and negatived.

Mr. Batiste: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I sought to persuade the House of the need for a Division on my Bill. I believe that I shouted "Aye" to the limit of my voice.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Janet Fookes): The Chair has to make a judgment as to the overwhelming preponderance of the view of the House. There was no need for a Division.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Register of Members' Interests has been published today. I have perused it and noted that many hon. Members have registered remunerated interests without providing the detail of how much money they are being paid. Does this not frustrate the decision of the House that any such payments made shall be detailed in the Register?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Any views on the matter must be referred directly to the Commissioner.

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I understand that the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) is to wind up the debate on the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Bill for the Opposition. I see that in the Register of Members' Interests, which was published today, the hon. Member has—quite properly—declared a fee received from chartered surveyors and a research assistant provided by the Building Employers Confederation. May we have your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, as to the hon. Member's participation in the debate after making those declarations of interest?

Madam Deputy Speaker: It is quite improper for the Chair to anticipate in that way.

Orders of the Day

Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Bill [Lords]

Order for Second Reading read.

5.5 pm

The Minister for Construction, Planning and Energy Efficiency (Mr. Robert B. Jones): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill underlines the Government's commitment to the construction industry, and I hope that it will be widely welcomed. For the assistance of hon. Members, I shall list the main purposes of the Bill. First, the Bill reinforces the moves of the construction industry to make itself more competitive in an increasingly international market and to deal with abuses of payment procedure. Secondly, it gives more flexibility to local authorities in the payment of grants for private sector renewal.

Thirdly, the Bill reforms the Architects Registration Council to ensure a greater degree of independence and more manageable arrangements. Fourthly, it builds on the success of the single regeneration budget and it brings together the grant-making powers for the budget. Finally, it introduces more flexibility into the home energy efficiency scheme to recognise the pace of technological change in the insulation industry. There are, of course, many other provisions.

The Bill has been considered in another place and it comes to the House much improved as a result of their Lordships' deliberations.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Mid–Kent): Am I mistaken in believing that the Bill says nothing about extending the building regulations to ensure that, from the beginning, the houses that are built are capable of housing people from every generation and people with varying degrees of disability? If so, is there scope to introduce such a measure into the Bill?

Mr. Jones: My hon. Friend is correct: that is not covered by the Bill. However, it has been raised in debates in the other place, and I assume that that is why he intervened. We have had an enormous response to our consultation about part M of the building regulations, which we are now digesting and analysing. We hope to produce revised part M regulations in due course.

I shall refer to the proposals in the Bill that affect the construction industry. The Bill is a little unusual in that this provision has been introduced in support of initiatives within the construction industry, as opposed to a specific follow-through of the Government's policy. Therefore, it has been a somewhat complex matter because we have had to negotiate with a large number of trade federations and interest groups to produce what I hope hon. Members will regard as a consensus within the industry. As such, the legislation is only the tip of the iceberg and much else is needed in the construction industry. I shall report on any progress in this regard to the House.

I pay tribute to the officials in my Department who have carried much of the load of the lengthy meetings that have taken place with the various interest groups in the construction industry. Although there is a consensus, it has moved around a little during the course of the deliberations and it has thrown up an enormous amount of extra work.

Something must be done about the competitiveness of the construction industry, which is a problem. In a report commissioned jointly by the Government and the construction industry, Sir Michael Latham, a former Member of the House, reported in 1994 that the productivity of construction in the UK was falling badly behind our overseas competitors. He found that costs were far too high and invited the industry to set itself a target of reducing those costs by 30 per cent. by 2000.

Sir Michael's conclusion may have given many in the industry a jolt, but it was partly based around frightening evidence from the industry's clients. For example, Lynton plc found that the cost of producing a typical American office building in North Carolina to be 32 per cent. lower than a similar building in Heathrow. Stanhope reported that during the period 1985 to 1991 it regularly achieved construction savings of around 30 per cent. compared with industry norms. Anyone who has heard Sir John Egan of the British Airports Authority making speeches on that subject will know that he regards the 30 per cent. target as modest. He has reported that, in most cases, things are 55 per cent. cheaper in the United States.

The Latham report gave no illusions that the solution would be simple. McDonald's Restaurants Ltd. provided at least one example of a cost-saving strategy that was multi-faceted. The company had reduced the cost and time of construction in the UK over the preceding five years by 60 per cent. and on-site construction times from 115 to 15 days by using modular techniques and treating production as an engineering exercise. It was looking for further improvements including standardisation of components, and it agreed on a yearly programme with producers to build up familiarity, team work and performance.

Given that background and the improvements registered by some clients, the House may wonder what legislation has to offer. It is not a process in which legislation offers everything. We cannot require the industry to innovate and use new technologies, although the Government can and do provide assistance to research; nor can we require the industry to use new forms of working such as partnering and benchmarking, although we are sponsoring initiatives aimed at just that as part of our wider competitiveness agenda. We have an obvious interest, and not just because of our commitment to the United Kingdom plc, as the industry's biggest customer. We have therefore been involved in much of the process to improve competitiveness and I would like to report on progress.

One of the first recommendations of the Latham review to be implemented, and one of the most important, is the setting up of the Construction Industry Board. It is comprised of representatives of the four main umbrella organisations in the construction industry representing the consultants and professionals, such as architects; the major contractors and master builders; the specialist subcontractors; and the material producers and suppliers. They have been joined on the CIB by representatives of the clients and of Government. It is the first time that the industry has had an effective co-ordinating body and the ability to speak with one voice.

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The CIB mechanism has spawned a number of working groups that have been created to deal with an aspect of improving the construction industry's productivity and competitiveness. Nevertheless, the Government have been persuaded by the construction industry that legislation is required to improve the contractual framework in which it operates. Construction is unusual in the way in which it is organised, because large projects in particular draw upon a wide range of construction skills that tend to be provide by independent specialists. Hence a client may retain a major contractor to organise a project for him, but that contractor will not necessarily use his own staff. Skills and labour may be bought in from subcontractors, each operating under a separate contract. On a large project, the final result will be a lattice of certainly tens, and possibly hundreds of contracts involving the clients, main contractors, designers, managers and specialist subcontractors.

I will come on, in a moment, to the way in which this Bill will tackle the problems that that can cause, but it is important that I first set the provisions in context. They complement a far wider process of productivity improvement. A process that is being co-ordinated by a central forum, the Construction Industry Board.

The board's main avenue of progress is via the 12 working groups. Those have a mixed membership that includes representation from the main contractors, specialist contractors, consultants and Government. In addition, there is representation from that important group—the clients. That wide cross-representation will help to ensure that the outputs from the working groups, whether they are reports, guidance notes, or codes of practice, will have the support of all sections of the industry as well as its clients.

I believe that it is true to say that the extent of that co-operation is unique in the history of the UK construction industry, and it is vital to ensure that the best possible use is made of that valuable resource.

Each of the working groups is making an important contribution to the process of change. I regret that I can only sketch out that contribution in the time available to me.

Working Group one has been producing a guide for clients on better briefing. It has reviewed the guidance already available, and used that to draw up a guide for the use of experienced and inexperienced clients, in the public and private sectors. Many of the problems encountered on construction sites can be laid at the door of inadequate or poor briefing by clients of their designers and constructors. The objective of the guide is to save clients time, trouble and money by helping them to determine the most appropriate construction project for their needs, and at the same time to foresee problems and avoid them. The guide is now in the final stages of preparation and is due to be considered by the board in the near future.

Working group two is producing a code of practice which is intended to cover the full procurement process. The objective is to enable clients to obtain their desired end product, get value for money, and guide industry practitioners on their roles. The code is intended to be an authoritative statement of best practice, and easily accessible to a wide range of clients and industry practitioners. The work is being co-ordinated with that of working group one. The code is now in its final stages and is due to be considered by the board shortly.

Working group three is also working on a code of practice, which aims to codify the practice of short tender lists and selection on the basis of both quality and price, and ensure that subcontracts meet the Latham principles. It aims to rule out Dutch auctioning, as well as securing co-operative working between subcontractors. The work is being co-ordinated with that of working group two. The final report is due in the near future.

Working group four has a dual task. As well as producing a mechanism to enable quality as well as price to be assessed when engaging professional consultants, it has been studying the issues relating to the creation of a single register of consultants seeking public sector work, and the appropriate requirements for entry on to the register. In tackling the first part of its work, the working group took full account of the various mechanisms that have already been produced in that respect. The guidance will enable full scope to be given to the qualitative aspects of consultants' tenders for commissions, thus enabling proper judgment to be given to value for money. The guidance has been endorsed by the National Audit Office as well as by the Audit Commission and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy. It has now been approved by the board and is due to be published shortly.

On the second part of its remit, the working group's report has been accepted by the board, and handed over to the Department of the Environment, which has let a contract for the redevelopment of that and the contractors management information system.

Working group five has also had a dual remit. As well as developing a standard pre-qualification form for public sector work, it has been considering the issues relating to the creation of a single register of contractors seeking public sector work, based on the existing contractors management information system. The working group's report has been approved by the board; as mentioned earlier, DOE has let a contract for the redevelopment of the contractors management information system.

Moving away from the production of codes and guidance notes, working group six was tasked with preparing a report identifying action for Government and for the industry on construction training for craft workers and operatives. The working group has produced a summary report with recommendations, which take account of the actions of the Construction Industry Training Board in implementing its new entrant training strategy. The working group also looked at the activities of non-CITB training organisations, the training of supervisors and technicians, the training needs of specialist trades, the delivery of training and its funding. That report is due to be considered by the board shortly.

Working group 7 is considering the image of the industry. Much of the criticism of the industry by outsiders is based on the industry's unfavourable image. Often that perception is based on a misunderstanding of the way that the industry operates or on misinformation or a general prejudice against what is perceived to be a dirty, noisy industry, which operates in unpleasant conditions. That unfavourable image is accepted as a significant problem and lies at the root of many of the problems that the industry has in dealing with the outside world.

The working group has produced several valuable ideas which have been accepted by the board. Plans are now in train to set up a national version of a considerate contractors' scheme, similar to that operated successfully by some local authorities. In addition, a marketing plan adopted by the board should lead to some exciting initiatives, which should go some way to counter the industry's poor image.

One of the outcomes of the industry's poor image is difficulty in recruiting women and ethnic minorities. The perception is that of an industry dominated by macho white men. Although that picture is not representative of the industry as a whole, it is not far enough from the truth to enable the industry to be counted as a true equal opportunities employer. Working group 7 was set up to tackle that problem, starting with equal opportunities for women.

The working group has gone to immense trouble to investigate the truth, examining all sectors of the industry to find out what the position is and what improvements could practically be made. Its aims are to encourage the development of attitudes, practices and physical environments that do not disadvantage women, and to encourage more women to enter the industry at all levels, trades and professions and to progress in it.

The working group's report includes an equal opportunities code of practice and an implementation plan for use at company level. The report has been adopted by the board, which aims to publish it soon.

Working group 9 considered the education of construction professionals. There have been several reports on that subject in recent years. The working group's task was to consider how best to achieve implementation of those recommendations that have received general industry support. The working group's solution was to produce a list of what it called "learning outcomes"—in other words, attributes that those graduating in construction disciplines should have acquired, as well as attributes that are appropriate for those undertaking continuing professional development during their careers. Those learning outcomes should better equip construction professionals to exercise management and business skills as well as professional judgment and awareness. The report has been adopted by the board and is in the process of being implemented.

A great deal of very good work is going on in many academic institutions, encouraging cross-disciplinary teaching in the construction industry. Not long ago, I visited the University of Central England in Birmingham, in the Perry Barr area, and was greatly impressed by what it is doing. I am sure that that is one of the ways to approach future professional education.

The House will have noted that the Bill omits any provisions on the subject of liability for construction defects, but that does not mean that the work carried out by working group 10 has been wasted. That working group was tasked with taking forward the recommendations in "Constructing the Team" that related to liability and insurance matters. It has produced three reports so far—on liability law reforms, latent defects insurance and supplier's liability. Some of the liability matters are currently under consideration by the Law Commission, and the working group's reports will provide useful material for the Law Commission's consideration.

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke–on–Trent, North): In view of that working party's findings about the construction of properties, what does the Minister propose, in legislation now before the House, in response to the anxieties of people in my constituency who have houses built under the Shindler method of construction, who are unable to claim as eligible owners?

Mr. Jones: With the greatest of respect to the hon. Lady, I do not believe that that relates to what is in the Bill. The issue of liability, in a much wider sense, is highly relevant to the reputation of the construction industry and to the problems which some people experience, but as construction can be considered, not in the narrow, but only in the wider, context, we must await what the Law Commission says.

The Law Commission recently reported on joint and several liability, and working group 10 has been reconvened to consider and respond to the Law Commission's report. Meanwhile, the working group is in discussion with the Association of British Insurers on the development of latent defect policies.

Working group 11 was charged with putting flesh on the bare bones of the 30 per cent. cost reduction target by considering what productivity improvements could be achieved and how best to achieve them. The working group's report has been approved by the board. It includes reports from sub-groups on benchmarking, quality and information technology, together with proposals for acting on its recommendations. It accepts the target of a 30 per cent. cost reduction in real construction costs as realistic and achievable, and identifies barriers that need to be overcome to secure such cost reductions. It also makes several research proposals, and emphasises the need to collate and disseminate best practice knowledge in a usable form to achieve significant productivity improvements. The board has delegated implementation of several of the recommendations to groups such as Construct IT and the Construction Research and Innovation Strategy Panel—CRISP—as well as setting up a new task force on cost reduction.

Finally, working group 12 was set up relatively recently, in June 1995. Its objective is to promote the practice of partnering, where appropriate, in both public and private sectors by establishing best practice benchmarks, facilitating the widest dissemination of good practice and ensuring the development of appropriate training and education packages. It has commissioned a scoping study of current practices and existing guidance to identify gaps in guidance and the need for additional promotion. It expects to complete its work in the autumn.

Before leaving the subject of the Construction Industry Board, I pay tribute to Sir Michael Latham for his invaluable work as the board's first chairman. Sir Michael recently stepped down after more than a year and a half at the helm of the board and its predecessor, the review implementation forum. As the board embarks on a longer-term business plan, he has handed over to Sir Ian Dixon, who has already been driving forward change in the industry.

I have reviewed the aspects of Latham being advanced by good practice initiatives, but there are two main areas in which Latham and the Government shared the view

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that good practice alone may not be enough to affect the radical change that we are seeking from this industry. These two areas are dispute resolution and payment, and it is in those areas that we propose legislation.

From the start, we applied two tests to this: the first, that there should be some consensus within the industry—I do not mean unanimity, but a consensus—and the second that there should be a workable, practical solution. That has led to a very difficult process of negotiation, because—

Sir Peter Fry (Wellingborough): Does my hon. Friend agree that the best way to secure the admirable objectives that he has just stated would be to have the widest possible definition of construction operations? I pay tribute to him for having widened the definition already and listened to representations on that point, but can he confirm that he remains open to further arguments, such as from the Electrical Contractors' Association, for further widening of the definition to include matters such as maintenance? The widening of the definition will obtain the maximum benefit from this piece of legislation.

Mr. Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. He has taken an active interest in those matters on behalf of, not only his constituents but a wider spread of people who have a significant interest at stake. I shall say something about definitions later, but we have always made it clear that we want to see the widest possible definition consistent with excluding those areas where there is no problem in practice, and of course the building material suppliers, because obviously they are in the same position as those who supply any other form of goods. Getting those definitions right in law is an extremely complex process; that is why there has been such a lively debate about it in the industry and in the other place.

Mr. Den Dover (Chorley): Is that why my hon. Friend intends to exclude process engineering—because he is happy that there is not too much litigation in that field?

Mr. Jones: As my hon. Friend said, the process engineering industry made it very clear to me—the record speaks for itself—that it has not had the same dispute and payment problems as the construction industry as a whole. That is why we decided that that industry should be excluded. In reaching that conclusion, we do not seek to exclude ordinary construction processes—there is sometimes a little of both on site. We are trying to address that consideration without embracing an industry that does not have any real problems.

We have made a judgment based on the practicalities. The negotiation process is difficult because consensus is not always fixed. The legislative process has provided an opportunity for people to advance new points of view or to put a new emphasis on existing concerns. That is one of the reasons why some of the legislation will be dealt with by way of statutory instrument instead of being on the face of the Bill. It seems quite likely that we shall want to respond to changing practices within the industry. Therefore, we should not lay down hard and fast rules that apply now but which may become outdated. Obviously, I hope that the construction industry will put its house in order so that the Government never have to intervene again. However, that will not necessarily occur and we shall want to respond to any changes.

If problems arise outside the area for which we have legislated, it seems reasonable at this stage not to preclude any changes in definition. We shall watch developments in all parts of the industry. We have adopted a flexible approach, which will be welcomed in the construction industry—and I suspect that it will not create divisions in the House.

Sir Anthony Durant (Reading, West): On the question of flexibility, part II of the Bill mentions contracts. When will the legislation come into effect, and what is the position regarding existing contracts, about which there is widespread concern?

Mr. Jones: I understand that concern, but it is not the practice of the House to legislate retrospectively. Various clients have introduced many improvements already. The date when the legislation comes into effect will be determined by its progress through the House—it has passed through the other place. As to flexibility, we shall listen to points raised by all hon. Members in order to ensure that we have got it right. I hope that that reassures my hon. Friend.

The debate so far illustrates the difficulty of shuttle diplomacy in this area. There are many conflicts of interest, not just between different umbrella groups but within them. I suspect that my officials who have not been exhausted by the process may be called to act as negotiators in future crises in Yugoslavia, the far east or wherever, such are the diplomacy skills that they have developed.

The Bill promotes a clear system of dispute resolution called adjudication. The industry is clear about what it means by that: it wants a mechanism that produces a fast and impartial resolution of a dispute and allows the contract to continue. The industry does not want the decision necessarily to be the final one. It wants to ensure that disputes are tested at the time, on the spot and are resolved quickly to the parties' satisfaction.

Our provisions provide a right to refer construction disputes for adjudication. We expect that entitlement to be met normally by the construction industry deciding, as a matter of course, to include adjudication arrangements in its contracts. The Government are challenging the industry to take action to improve its contractual practice and to introduce the sort of adjudication arrangements that best suit it. The best outcome must be that there is no need for a fall-back.

However, we have a view about the minimum standards that contractual adjudication clauses must satisfy. They relate to speed of decision, impartiality, and the freedom for an adjudicator to investigate disputes and reach his own conclusion. In another place we added the necessary provision to give adjudicators protection from personal liability so long as they act in good faith.

The Government are conscious that one party to a contract may think that it can tip the scales in its favour if it strikes out the adjudication clause. That is the industry's experience until now. If there is no adjudication provision in a contract, or the clause is defective in any way, we shall provide a fall-back adjudication mechanism in our scheme for construction contracts, to be made by statutory instrument.

The Bill acts to improve payments in the industry. It abolishes "pay when paid" clauses, except in the event of insolvency. It is relatively common for contractors to refuse payment to the next contractor down the line until they have themselves been paid by their client. At worst, that can lead to delays in payment lasting months. The Government do not consider that to be acceptable and we wish to put an end to that practice. I have always said that if the industry treats its subcontractors badly, it will end up with bad subcontractors—and that is not in the interests of the industry.

The Bill also provides a right to payment by instalment on longer contracts and establishes a notification system for payment. If there is any intention to withhold payment on its final due date, a notice must be served specifying the reasons for withholding that payment. There is a multiplicity of possible payment arrangements for construction contracts. It is not for Government to decide that one is better than another: no doubt they all have their place.

However, Parliament can legislate to ensure that contracts are be clear about what payments become due and when. We can ensure that information about payment is available to the payee. We can agree arrangements which expose unreasonable grounds for withholding payment and which can be challenged before an adjudicator. That is the basis of what we propose.

I shall now outline the adjudication and payment scheme. Under the Bill, there will be a scheme establishing, first, a fall-back adjudication provision if the contracts agreed by the construction industry do not adequately provide one; and, secondly, relevant payment provisions if the contracts signed by parties are inadequate.

When the Bill was being considered in another place, we set out a first shot at the scheme so that Parliament could see how it might fit the workings of the Bill. The construction industry told us that our illustrative adjudication scheme was not to its liking. We have taken account of those views and we intend to modify our proposals. My Department will undertake a consultation exercise following Royal Assent which will set out the detailed options for a statutory adjudication scheme.

Mr. Dover: While welcoming the fact that reflection upon the legislation's passage through Standing Committee will assist the follow-up of the regulations after Royal Assent, should they not receive parliamentary scrutiny also? Should not the necessary clauses be carved out during the legislation's passage through Standing Committee? Perhaps my hon. Friend has set his mind against that course and is waiting for Royal Assent.

Mr. Jones: We are consulting about that, but the Bill provides for a statutory instrument approach. The House will have the chance to debate those matters if it so chooses and we shall see what emerges. There are several potential variants and we shall not prejudge what the final adjudication scheme will look like—that is in the hands of the industry.

Let me put beyond any doubt our intention that the scheme will come into effect only if construction contracts are deficient in any way. Our aim is to encourage the industry to get its contracts right. Furthermore, we are providing adjudication and not arbitration. We intend to propose that parties be required to abide by an adjudicator's decision until practical completion of the contract, but that thereafter they may reopen the dispute.

I re-emphasise the remarks by my noble Friend Lord Lucas during debate in the other place. We do not intend that adjudication should be used simply to postpone resolving disputes. We have had enough of disputes within the construction industry. Government, the industry and its clients want to see an end to them: they are expensive and damaging to the industry's productivity and reputation. We want to see the industry using the opportunity that we are giving it to improve its payment record and to resolve disputes quickly, without dragging them into arbitration or before the courts.

We intend the Bill's provision to cover a wide span of the construction industry. After all, that industry asked for the Bill. It desperately wants revised payment arrangements and the ability to resolve disputes quickly and easily. The Government welcomed the debates in another place because they helped to refine and widen the definition of construction operations. We shall be tabling a number of amendments in Committee as a result.

Mr. Anthony Coombs (Wyre Forest): Who will decide whether construction contracts include adequate provisions for payment or adjudication? If it is to be the Construction Industry Board or a similar organisation, there will be fears that contracts will have to be submitted very early in the construction process and that delays will be incurred while they are being considered.

Mr. Jones: If the contracts do not meet the tests that I have set out, they will be in conflict with the law and, under the statutory instrument, they will be null and void. Therefore, any party to those contracts will be able to fall back on the scheme that we have prepared.

Mr. Coombs: My question related not to the criteria by which those contracts will be null and void, but to who decides and when. That is a crucial matter for those entering such contracts.

Mr. Jones: As I said, the decision will go back to the courts. If there is a problem with a contract that does not meet our particular test, any party to such a contract will be able to seek redress under the Government's fall-back scheme.

In respect of definition, we are currently looking at supply and fit contracts. It is not our intention that the Bill should apply to suppliers of building materials and components as other provisions, such as the Supply of Goods and Services Act 1982, apply to them. Some construction contracts, however, require the manufacture of specialist building components as well as their fitting—such as those in respect of air-conditioning equipment. We hope to extend the Bill's provision to those contracts. Such a change will be widely welcomed, especially by smaller specialist contractors in construction.

We are also clarifying the exclusion of process engineering that was mentioned by hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Dover). Examples of that are oil refining and chemicals. There has been much unnecessary confusion. We want to make it absolutely clear that only

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the plant and machinery and its associated steelwork are excluded from the Bill and not wider construction operations on process engineering sites.

The Bill also reforms the help that we give to the renewal of private-sector housing. It aims to give local authorities the flexibility that they need to direct resources effectively, giving help where it is most needed and to maximum effect.

We have come a considerable way from the days of wholesale and unquestioning slum clearance which could too easily destroy close-knit local communities. We have provided for the basic amenities—inside lavatories and separate bathrooms—and we now need to consider how the money available to help remedy the remaining unfitness should be used.

We have left behind the days when it was thought necessary to spread resources widely so that everybody got something. There are fewer unfit properties, with the number of unfit occupied private sector houses falling by 7 per cent. to about 1 million between the English house condition surveys of 1986 and 1991. One third of those could be made fit for under £500 each and are owned by people who could easily afford the cost.

We need to stand firmly on the principle that home owners are primarily responsible for repairing and maintaining their properties. In 1991 alone, home owners spent £20 billion on repairs and improvements to their homes. The need for public expenditure on private-sector renewal arises only where people really cannot afford to undertake repairs. It represents only about 2 per cent. of the total amount spent each year on repairs and renovation in the private stock.

Mrs. Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): When examining grant aid to private and public home owners, did the Minister consider improving water efficiency and water safety in people's homes? I am particularly concerned about the replacement of lead piping in public and private-sector properties. The Institute of Plumbing is keen to promote that, partly because 50 per cent. of trainee plumbers finish their NVQ training without any suitable site experience. That problem would be redressed by a major programme of grant aid for lead replacement.

Mr. Jones: The hon. Lady raises an interesting point and seeks to widen the definition of unfit. Hon. Members have made a number of suggestions as to whether the present definition applies to the modern world. The Bill does not alter that definition, but no doubt the hon. Lady will seek an opportunity to debate why not or whether it should be changed in one way or another.

We have to strike a balance between what central Government tell local government to do and what local government is left to decide for itself in targeting expenditure effectively. The Bill moves the balance towards local government following the principle that, as we move towards targeting expenditure at those in greatest need, we need to increase the decision-making power of local authorities in respect of priorities.

The current framework for renovation grants in the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 was set up to do just that. It was intended to encourage a more strategic and area-based approach to addressing the need for renewal and renovation. It targeted help better on poor condition houses and poorer people and introduced a grant to give systematic help to disabled people. It also gave a right to mandatory grant to people on low incomes living in poor housing.

It gave local authorities a good range of tools, but experience has shown that the pressures for grant assistance have resulted in mandatory grants taking the lion's share of resources. That has distorted any strategy that local authorities may have developed and area-based activity has been undermined in many authorities.

The achievements of the current system are considerable. Nearly 500,000 grants have been awarded since 1990—170,000 of them were awarded to help make properties fit.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): Does the Minister accept that people with a legal right to mandatory grants did not get them and there was a de facto system of rationing? That is certainly the case in my local authority area in Pendle and elsewhere in north-east Lancashire.

Mr. Jones: The hon. Gentleman highlights a point that has been raised many times by individual local authorities. It is precisely why almost all the local authorities that I met during my time as Minister responsible for housing told me that they wanted an end to the mandatory system which would also enable them to avoid the pepper-potting that occurs under the present arrangements.

Reform is necessary. In many areas, a strategic approach aimed at the renewal of an entire area or focused on particular problems is likely to be more cost-effective than meeting individual needs as they arise. Most local authorities accept that. What we hear from them—rather than from the local authority associations—is that the move away from the mandatory grant system will allow them to be more effective in using grant to meet their local needs and priorities.

Central Government will continue to provide special funding for local authorities in the form of grant. That will ensure that local authorities continue to prioritise expenditure and do not divert resources into other areas.

As the hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) raised the matter, perhaps I could ask about Labour's opposition to the abolition of mandatory renovation grants. The Opposition have not even said whether they would reverse the legislation in the unlikely event of their forming the next Government. If they do not intend to at least they should have the honesty to support the sensible measures in the Bill, as many Labour councillors do. If they would reinstate mandatory grants, they should tell us where they would get the money to do that. Unless the Opposition give us a firm pledge on what they would do, their opposition to the Bill is absolutely worthless.

Mr. Nick Raynsford (Greenwich): The Minister has implied that the reinstatement of mandatory grants would require additional expenditure. Will he give us the Government's estimates for next year's expenditure without mandatory grants as his comments imply that there will be a reduction in expenditure?

Mr. Jones: The Government's plans have been published and show level pegging into next year.

Mr. Raynsford: If the Minister now concedes that there will be level pegging, how will the reintroduction of mandatory grants lead to increased expenditure?

Mr. Jones: The hon. Member for Pendle raised that point. With or without mandatory grants, there will be queues if we keep to the present arrangements. That is a reasonable issue to debate. We concluded that we should end the mandatory grants system. If the Opposition's response is that the mandatory grants system should be retained, but that money should be made available to deal with the present demand-led system, they should say so and let us know where the money will come from.

The Bill retains mandatory and discretionary disabled facilities grants, which are designed to help disabled people stay in their own homes. It relaxes the means test so those caring for disabled people, other than spouses, will no longer be expected to contribute to the cost of adaptations. Disabled adults living, for example, with their parents or children will be more likely to receive grant.

There was a useful discussion in the other place on those provisions and as a result, we have included a less dated reference to disability for the purposes of the Bill, replacing one that had been based on the definition in the National Assistance Act 1948. We have ensured that the wide eligibility has not been prejudiced by such a change, and I hope that the new definition will command the agreement of the House.

The Bill retains grant assistance to landlords on a discretionary basis, allowing local authorities to decide the level of grant to award to landlords and introducing the possibility of attaching conditions—such as nomination rights and good maintenance, to assist in securing strategic aims.

The Bill also simplifies and replaces the minor works assistance scheme. Local authorities will continue to be able to give help for minor repairs, improvements and adaptations through home repair assistance to the elderly, infirm, disabled people and persons on means-tested benefits. I welcome what is being done to bring into eligibility people living on houseboats and in mobile homes.

There was some debate in the other place, which was continued this afternoon, about the current standard used to assess the fitness of a property. We have announced the intention, once the Bill is out of the way and before the end of the year, to begin a review of the housing fitness standard, which will ensure that the requirements of the standard and its application are properly considered.

The Bill also reforms the system of architects registration. In the United Kingdom, to use the title "architect" a person must be registered with the Architects Registration Council of the United Kingdom—know by its acronym of ARCUK. Anyone is allowed to design buildings, but they cannot use the title "architect" unless they are registered with ARCUK. Our proposals seek to reform that body. For the sake of clarity, I should mention that the Royal Institute of British Architects is a separate professional organisation to which most, but not all, architects belong. It is not affected by this legislation.

The reason for reforming ARCUK is that since it was established in 1931, it has grown large and cumbersome and it has taken on functions that are not strictly concerned with registration. Moreover, the council has difficulty in enforcing protection of title. Because of those problems, ARCUK asked the Government in 1991 to review the architects registration legislation. The Government commissioned John Warne to undertake a review, and his subsequent report highlighted the inefficiencies of the existing registration system. John Warne's recommended solution was to repeal the architects registration Acts and to abolish protection of the title "architect". The Government were initially prepared to accept that recommendation but, in view of the strength of feeling against abolition, agreed instead to explore ways of improving the existing system.

As a result, the Government worked with the profession to produce an agreed package of reforms. The subsequent public consultation revealed a strong level of support for the proposed reforms within and without the profession. Our proposals build firmly on the existing pattern of regulation in the architects profession and streamline the registration body. They reduce its size from 73 members to 15 and remove unnecessary committees. They limit the council's functions to matters strictly related to registration and discipline, and they create a genuinely minimalist body that we expect to remain minimalist.

The reforms provide for the profession, its customers and the public to be represented on the board. The changes are designed to maintain a high level of public confidence in the standards of the architectural profession and they provide a channel for complaints where those standards are not met.

The Bill also includes provisions to extend the powers to give financial assistance for regeneration and development, to provide a single legislative basis for the single regeneration budget, which currently operates under a range of powers. The SRB brings together a number of programmes to provide co-ordinated support for regeneration initiatives in England. New schemes are supported through the competitive challenge fund, which has already been widely welcomed as a success. That success was endorsed in the recent report by the Environment Select Committee on the conduct and outcome of the first challenge fund bidding round. The Committee concluded that the challenge fund had already demonstrated its potential to achieve excellent value for taxpayers' money. Local partnerships have submitted high quality bids, reflecting tremendous co-operative effort towards the successful regeneration of their areas.

The Bill is wide ranging and addresses many problems. I have no hesitation in commending it to the House.

5.54 pm

Mr. Frank Dobson (Holborn and St. Pancras): I welcome the Minister, who moved the Second Reading in the absence of his boss, the Secretary of State for the Environment, who is variously reported as being in Norfolk and in Derbyshire. I believe that the right hon. Gentleman is trying to track down the last remaining Tory councillors in those areas.

This is the second housing Bill that the Government have introduced this year. Like the first one, this Bill does not measure up to the housing problems faced by so many people. It does not even address most of their difficulties. As with the Housing Bill, the Government's proposals will make matters worse—certainly for owner-occupiers and private tenants whose homes need to be repaired; the Bill deprives those people of their right to renovation grants.

[Mr. Frank Dobson]

Anyone who listens to people in Britain today—whether in city centres, suburbs, market towns or villages—knows that millions of people feel insecure in their jobs, on the streets, about their pensions, about the prospects for their children and grandchildren, and about their homes. The Housing Bill ignored the insecurity of owner-occupiers and only tinkered with the dangers and insecurity faced by people who live in houses in multiple occupancy. It claimed to help leaseholders, but failed to deliver. It increased the insecurity of private tenants and made homeless people even more insecure.

The Housing Bill was improved in Committee as a result of the efforts of my hon. Friends—in particular, by the spectacularly well-informed contributions of my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich (Mr. Raynsford). By ancient and ridiculous custom, the House confines the description "learned" to Members of Parliament who are Queen's counsel. My hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich is truly learned on the subject of housing. He is certainly the most learned in the House and among the most learned in the country, and more learned on the subject than me. Even the combined efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and all the other Opposition Members in Committee on the Housing Bill could not turn that legislative sow's ear into a silk purse.

The first part of the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Bill covers housing. It does not just ignore problems or pretend to deal with them—it will make matters worse for many people. The Bill will take away the right of owner-occupiers and tenants to grants for repairing their homes, so it will protract the enormous backlog of disrepair that has left 1.5 million homes unfit for human habitation. The problem afflicts people throughout the country. There are 79,000 unfit homes in the north-east, 257,000 in the north-west, 160,000 in Yorkshire and Humberside, 116,000 in the east midlands, 200,000 in the west midlands, 114,000 in the south-west, 149,000 in the south-east—excluding London, and more than 240,000 in London.

The fact that a property has been officially designated unfit for human habitation does not mean that no one is living in it. Most such properties are still used—that, after 17 years of Tory government. The Government's appalling housing record is not confined to leaving millions of people in homes that are unfit for human habitation, but goes much wider. The Government, having encouraged the public to become owner-occupiers, turned around and kicked millions of people in the teeth.

The Tories can no longer claim to be the party of owner-occupiers—far from it. Theirs is the party of repossessions, mortgage arrears and negative equity. One million or more families live in homes worth less than their mortgages. Negative equity preys on the minds of more than 180,000 families in London, 400,000 in the south-east, 160,000 in the south-west, 90,000 in the east midlands, 60,000 in the west midlands and 50,000 in the north-west. Negative equity is something new. It is the Tories' latest addition to the lexicon of housing misery and their novel contribution to the tide of insecurity that afflicts so many families.

That is not the end. A quarter of a million families are seriously in arrears with their mortgage. Under Labour, serious arrears affected only 10,000 families. So mortgage arrears under the Tories are 25 times worse than they were under Labour. That is another bitter, depressing and unsettling Tory contribution to family insecurity.

People who are in arrears fear that their homes will be repossessed and they are right to fear repossessions, because about 50,000 families a year have their homes repossessed. Repossessions under the Tories are running at 17 times the rate under Labour. So there are 17 repossessions under the Tories for every one repossession under Labour. The figures work out at about 1,000 repossessions a week.

Since Second Reading of the Housing Bill, which did nothing for owner-occupiers, about 14,000 more families have lost their homes. That has all happened under a Prime Minister who told the British people at the general election:

"We stopped the repossessions just before Christmas"—

and:

"We are going to make life easier for people buying their own home"—

and:

"We will maintain mortgage tax relief."

No wonder Mrs. Thatcher has said:

"You can imagine my horror when the Government which succeeded me cut mortgage tax relief. It's not fair on all those young people who bought in the knowledge that it was there."

It is not just owner-occupiers who have been hammered by the Government. They have also hammered tenants. Average council rents are six times as high as they were under Labour. In the past five years, they have risen by more than three times the rate of inflation. In the same five years, while the retail prices index rose by 27 per cent., housing association rents went up by 85 per cent. Rent rises in the private sector have been even worse. As a result, the cost to the taxpayer of housing benefit has risen from £4 billion a year to £10 billion a year—and a great deal of that money has gone straight from the taxpayer into the pockets of the landlords and moneylenders who bankroll the Tory party.

That is not the only help that the Tory party has given landlords. The Tories' betrayal of the hopes of leaseholders shows where their loyalties really lie. The Government said that they would help leaseholders, but they did not. The Government tried to con people that they were the leaseholders' friend, but the only people they conned were Tory Members of Parliament who voted to look after the landlords who bankroll the Tory party rather than the interests of the thousands of leaseholders they claim to represent. That is the only possible explanation of why Tory Members of Parliament who represent more than 1 million people in places such as Brighton and Hove, Kensington and Chelsea, Ealing, Merton, the Wirral, Southend, Wandsworth, Fulham and Barnet, last week joined the Government to vote down our proposal to give leaseholders the right to manage and other proposals to strengthen the hands of leaseholders in their dealings with unscrupulous landlords.

The Government have weakened the position of homeless families by putting through laws to leave them in perpetual insecurity, living for ever—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Janet Fookes): Order. Before the hon. Gentleman continues, may I remind him that we are debating the Second Reading of

a Bill which does not encompass all housing matters? This is not a general debate on housing. I am prepared to allow a certain latitude by way of background, but it must not allowed to become the foreground.

Mr. Dobson: I wish to point out, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the Bill has 102 clauses, which relate to the circumstances of owner-occupiers, tenants and landlords, and that those are the matters to which I am referring. I am coming to points that are directly involved in the Bill, but I understand that a debate on Second Reading allows general points to be made and attention to be drawn to the fact that the Bill does not deal with many of the housing problems that people face.

Mr. Dover: As the hon. Gentleman has wandered away from the subject of the Bill, I want to put him to the test on one matter that he has raised. He gave the impression that, under the Prime Minister, mortgage tax relief would disappear. It is still there and it will be there until the next general election. Can the hon. Gentleman spell out whether it will last after the general election, should the Labour party win?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will not be tempted down pathways that have little to do with the Bill.

Mr. Dobson: I shall make two points in response to the hon. Gentleman. First, I have not wandered away from the Bill, but the Bill has wandered away from the housing problems of people. Secondly, I said nothing about what the Prime Minister intends to do about mortgage tax relief. I mentioned his promise to keep it and his decision to go back on that promise and reduce it twice.

The Government have reduced and weakened the position of homeless families by putting through laws to leave them in perpetual insecurity, as I have said. The Government reject the commonsense answer to homelessness, overcrowding and homes unfit for habitation—that is in the Bill—which is a house-building programme. The Government, to use the new, bureaucratic jargon, have downsized the building programme. They inherited a council building programme of 54,000 new homes. By last year, they had downsized it to 404. Labour built 135 new homes for every one built under the Tories. No wonder homelessness has doubled under the Government.

Mr. Robert B. Jones: Since the hon. Gentleman has clearly implied that the Labour party would increase the programme, will he tell us to what level he would increase it, and from where the finance would come?

Mr. Dobson: We have made it clear—I shall come to this matter in my speech—that we believe that the Government, let alone the next Labour Government should—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment (Mr. James Clappison): Answer the question.

Mr. Dobson: Let me finish. If the Government had any sense, they would allow councils to start to invest the takings from the right-to-buy sale of council houses in building homes for people who have nowhere to live.

Mr. Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dobson: Let me finish the point. The Minister has asked a question and I am trying to answer it.

We have been urged by people in the building industry to ensure a phased release of the money, because they do not want to go back to the boom and bust that the industry suffered before. If the Minister does not like the answer, that is tough.

Mr. Jones: I do not like the answer, because it is not a full answer. Housing publications have condemned the Labour party's calculations as wholly unreal on that point. What would be the consequences for council tax payers of spending even a further 20 per cent. of the sums that are on deposit?

Mr. Dobson: It is no good the Minister chiding me about the idea of councils being allowed to spend the takings from the right-to-buy scheme. The Government permitted councils to do that for one year because they thought it was popular. In Scotland, the Government have insisted that councils spend every penny of their takings. The Minister should not suggest that there is anything odd or dangerous to public finance about what we suggest.

If we consider the figures on homelessness in every part of the country and the amount of houses being built, we see that Labour built 9,000 new council homes a year in London. Last year, the Tories managed just 22 new homes to help the 29,000 families who are officially accepted as homeless. In Yorkshire, under Labour, 4,000 new homes a year were built. Last year, 24 were built—but there are more than 11,000 homeless families in Yorkshire. In the north-west, Labour built 8,000 new homes a year. Last year, the Tories managed just three—not 3,000, not 300, but three—to help meet the housing needs of 18,000 families in the north-west who have nowhere decent to live. In the south-east outside London, Labour built 11,000 homes a year. The Tory grand total is 47. There are 18,000 homeless families in the south-east outside London.

I could give other examples. Ministers and Government apologists will say that, although council house building has been reduced, housing association building has expanded. That is true, but it has not made up the difference. Council and housing association building averaged more than 134,000 a year under Labour; under the Government it is running at 34,000 a year—100,000 fewer. Even housing association building is being cut now.

The common-sense answer to the problem, which has been pursued by all Governments since the 1930s, is to build more homes for people who are homeless or living in overcrowded or degrading conditions. That is why Labour has pledged—I repeat—to introduce a phased release of the takings from the right-to-buy sale of council houses for investment in new housing. That would be good, not just for the families who would get new homes, but for jobs in the building industry and the building supply industry, such as brick makers in Bedfordshire, carpet weavers in Kidderminster, and the people who make central heating boilers in Belper, electrical fittings in Basildon or lavatory pans in Stoke-on-Trent.

Jobs would also be created if people were set to work renovating homes—but the Bill wants to cut house renovations. That is why it proposes to take away the right of householders to a renovation grant to make their homes fit for habitation. That is nothing wildly luxurious. It is to make their homes structurally stable, free from serious

[Mr. Dobson]

disrepair or dampness which harms a family's health, to provide proper heating, lighting, ventilation, wholesome piped water—if it is lead-filled it may fall outside the definition of wholesome—a bath or shower, a lavatory, drainage of foul water and a decent place to prepare food. Those are basic standards—nothing luxurious.

At the moment, people have a right to such grants, but not for much longer. The Government are proposing to take away that right. Let us be clear. A substantial proportion of the people whose homes need bringing up to those basic standards are elderly or hard up, or both. As the number of old people increases, and as the policy of care in the community leaves more people in their own homes, the requirement to bring homes up to scratch will increase, not diminish.

Mr. Robert B. Jones: As the hon. Gentleman is criticising the Government for taking away mandatory grants, will he tell us whether a Labour Government would restore them—yes, or no?

Mr. Dobson: The Government have not managed to take them away yet. The Opposition may be able to stop the measure going through. We shall certainly try. We shall expect all minority parties and any Tory Member who claims to look after owner-occupiers to join us.

The Government's response to the problem is not to build more houses or do more rehabilitation; it is, as usual, totally bureaucratic. They are changing the rules rather than getting the work done. The Government want to take away householders' right to a renovation grant because too many householders have been exercising that right. The Government are nothing if not wrong headed.

The scheme for mandatory renovation grants has had a high take-up and was doing a lot of good, so the Government have decided to drop it. Contrast that with their infamous rent-to-mortgage scheme, which is an abject failure. Despite expensive advertising, precisely 15 families have availed themselves of it, but the Government will keep it going. Their slogan appears to be, "If it works, drop it. If it fails, keep it." That may be a sneak preview of the slogan that they have thought up as their last desperate bid to win the coming general election.

In future, grants will be available only at the discretion of a local council. That will increase the bureaucratic burden on, and administrative costs of, every council. Councils will be encouraged to exercise their discretion in favour of not making a grant because they are to be given the right to defer action year after year even where houses are so unfit that repair notices have been served.

In the other place, the Government rejected an amendment that would have enabled grants to be made to provide fuel-efficient space heating. That would have been an enormous benefit to many families whose unfit houses are the very opposite of fuel-efficient, and leave families often old, certainly cold and frequently skint. Investment in renovation grants has fallen to £270 million from more than £400 million three years ago. It is an illuminating illustration of the Government's priorities that they are cutting the funds available to bring 1.5 million homes unfit for habitation up to decent standards while giving increasing tax concessions—in the most recent year totalling more than £60 million—to rich people who inherit stately homes.

The Bill also extends the scope of home energy efficiency grants. A fat lot of good that will do. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, in his November Budget, slashed one third off the money available to that scheme, so the combined effect of this change and the Budget will mean less money spread more thinly.

The Government are trying to shift the responsibility for cutting house renovation on to local councils. They hope that councils will be blamed for turning down claims for home renovation grants. The Government say that the proposed change will make it easier for councils to promote group repair and area renewal policies, but it is just as likely that the limited funds that they are making available will be used up simply coping with grants to fund the most urgent repairs and to disabled people. Instead of hitting owner-occupiers and tenants in that way, the Government should have examined, with other agencies, including lenders and builders, other ways of stepping up funding, rather than cutting it.

At the moment, councils can deal with unfit homes by asking owners to improve them. If that response does not succeed, they can serve repair, closure or clearance notices. For people who are trying to live in such places, which are officially recognised as unfit for habitation, the enforcement procedures for the orders are already protracted, cumbersome and unsatisfactory. Up to now, any delays have been despite the law and the intentions of Parliament. If we accept that councils can issue a notice formally to defer action on a place unfit for habitation, delay will become the law of the land. That may be all very well for the dodgy landlords who fund the Tory party, but it will be hell for the tenants. Just think about it. For the first time this century, the law will say to families that the place in which they are living is unfit for habitation, but that it will stay that way—by law.

I come next to those parts of the Bill that deal with the construction industry. The Latham report—we pay tribute to Sir Michael—published in 1994 recommended that the productivity, effectiveness and efficiency of the construction industry could be improved substantially by making changes in the culture, procurement methods and contractual basis under which the industry has operated. It recognised that relations between clients, consultants, contractors and sub-contractors had been far too adversarial and that that had been to the detriment of all concerned.

Latham recommended that more emphasis should be placed on quality, as well as price, and that well-informed clients and well-chosen consultants and contractors could, between them, achieve economies, save time and obtain better quality work, and that they would do that best by co-operation and team work. Making profits by getting a job well done, to cost and on time, would be better than the present system, which has often reduced clients, contractors and sub-contractors to trying to rip off one another in order to stay in business. Many have ended up suing through every court in the land. That has done wonders for barristers in my constituency, but it has not helped to establish an efficient and cost-effective building industry.

That sensible view was welcomed by most people in the industry and it may even have been welcomed by Ministers at the Department of the Environment, but it was and remains anathema to the Department of Trade and Industry, to many Cabinet Ministers and especially to the Deputy Prime Minister. They all advocate deregulated,

cut-throat competition as the answer to all the nation's ills. Those manic deregulators have been embarrassed by the Latham report because it recognises that the efficiency of the construction industry has been reduced rather than enhanced as a result of practising for decades exactly what the Government now preach will be good for every other industry.

The report, I am glad to say, also reflects the proposals being advocated by the Labour party for more investment in training and in research and development to bring about short-term and long-term improvements in productivity, quality and safety. Ironically, the previous under-investment in research and development in the construction industry should mean that any increased investment in research and development now will show bigger and more immediate returns than would be obtained in industries that had always invested heavily in research and development.

The Bill proposes changes in the law to bring construction contracts in line with Latham's proposals but, almost inevitably, it does not go far enough in some respects, while in one major area it goes right off beam. The definition of construction contracts in the Bill covers only about 50 per cent. of construction operations. The Government have promised changes to extend the definition, but we shall need to look at them carefully.

Where the Government have got it just plain wrong is in the detail of their proposals to provide for disputes to be referred to an adjudicator. At present, they propose that the adjudicator's decision should be not just binding, but final. That is not what the industry wants.

Mr. Robert B. Jones: I do not think that the hon. Gentleman was listening when I spelled that out. We certainly did not say that. I can reassure the hon. Gentleman on that point.

Mr. Dobson: Well, that is my understanding, and it is also my understanding that it is not what the industry wants. The industry would prefer an adjudicator who can make a quick, binding interim decision that is not final, but subject to review—what is sometimes described as a "pay now, argue later" decision. That is what Latham proposed and what the industry wants, but—perhaps as a result of the malign intervention of the Department of Trade and Industry—the Government were so incompetent that they could not get it right.

In response to almost universal condemnation of their proposals by people in the industry, the Government have said that they will withdraw and amend what the Minister described as the illustrative scheme of constructive contracts. We welcome that, but we shall press for clear and binding Government commitments in regard to what goes into that scheme before the Bill leaves the House. I remind Conservative Members who are concerned about the future of the construction industry of the promises—made from the Dispatch Box—that Railtrack would not be sold. Those promises ensured the passage of the Bill that became the Railways Act 1993, but they have somehow disappeared—and Railtrack is now being sold. We want those commitments from the Government. They need not be in the Bill itself, but we want the Government to make clear, irrevocable and binding commitments before the Bill is passed.

The scheme must also—as it is intended to—provide clear requirements for timely payments to contractors and sub-contractors, and make void any clause in a contract that seeks to allow a contractor to pay a sub-contractor only when he himself has been paid. That is known in the trade as a "pay when paid" clause. We shall carefully scrutinise all aspects of the proposals in Committee and on Report because we believe that full legislative backing must be given to the recommendations in the Latham report and to the changes already set in train in the industry without the Government's intervention.

The Bill changes the arrangements for funding regeneration projects, whose present main vehicle is the single regeneration budget. We do not object to the clarification in the Bill, but although the "beauty competition" approach to regeneration may, in promoting local partnerships, have proved useful in the past, it is no longer generally required for that purpose. Working in local partnerships has become the standard practice of local councils.

I believe that the retention and expansion of the "beauty competition" approach owes more to Ministers' desire to go around the country claiming personal and political credit for the work of local councils, local businesses and the local voluntary sector. Perhaps that is what the Secretary of State is doing this afternoon. That approach represents what might be called the little Jack Horner syndrome: for the benefit of regional television and local radio and newspapers, Ministers want to be seen to put in their thumb, pull out a plum and say, "What a good boy am I."

There is too much central Government interference—too much ministerial interference. Too many local decisions are being made by unaccountable, faceless bureaucrats. Schemes such as this reek of the prejudice that "the man in Whitehall" knows best. That is a doubtful proposition at the best of times, but when we know that the man in question is the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), it becomes a joke.

A section of the Bill that we do welcome is the provision for relocation grants in clearance areas, which is the product of an excellent initiative by Birmingham city council. That council, which is usually denounced by Conservative Members, has demonstrated both the need for and the value of such grants. They help to maintain communities while replacing much of the worst housing stock in inner-city areas. Our only concern is that, without the resources to back up the new grant, local authorities may well not be able to use their new powers to the extent that they would wish.

The Bill also empowers the Secretary of State to set up one or more residuary body to take over the assets and liabilities of the Commission for the New Towns, urban development corporations and housing action trusts. That idea is not as straightforward as it may seem. The residuary bodies set up after the abolition of the Greater London council and the metropolitan councils behaved like estate agents; members of the London residuary body behaved like very dodgy estate agents. Its behaviour over the disposal of county hall was deplorable, and remains a scandal to this day. There is reason to believe that that deal was pushed through by the then Secretary of State for the Environment—the present Deputy Prime Minister—in the days immediately preceding the last general election because he was determined that county hall should be sold before the election regardless of the cost and the harm done to anyone else.

Mr. Tony Banks (Newham, North-West): Is my hon. Friend aware that £10 million of the agreed £60 million

[Mr. Tony Banks]

is still to be paid? It is not due to be paid until 2012, and there is precious little chance that London ratepayers will see any of it. That is what a residuary body does for us when it is set up by the Tories.

Mr. Dobson: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. I have here a copy of the Public Accounts Committee's report—

Mr. Matthew Banks (Southport): What has that to do with the Bill?

Mr. Dobson: It has a great deal to do with the Bill. The Bill proposes the establishment of residuary bodies, or a residuary body. If those bodies are to be staffed by Tory placemen—and possibly placewomen—who are a gang of total incompetents, as is illustrated by what happened to county hall, everyone should be concerned.

Let me quote from the evidence given to the PAC. The Chairman asked Sir Godfrey Taylor, the boss:

"Do you consider you obtained a firm bid from Shirayama?"

Sir Godfrey replied,

"Yes, I did."

The Chairman asked:

"Why did you not hold them to it?"

Sir Godfrey replied:

"It was possibly the biggest disappointment I have had in my public life that we were not able to do that."

He was then asked:

"But if you had a firm bid, properly backed by legal guarantees, you would have had them over a barrel would you not?"

He replied:

"We could not enforce it in the British courts."

This was a British body selling a bit of British property.

When asked,

"Why not?",

Sir Godfrey replied:

"For the simple reason that we could not."

He was asked:

"Why did you not get a bank guarantee then if you felt that way?"

The answer was:

"They were not willing to give us a bank guarantee."

He was asked:

"Could you not have insisted on it?"

He replied,

"We could have."

That was the standard of the performance of one residuary body—the residuary body responsible for disposing of the most valuable asset possessed by any such body. We do not want any more scandals of that kind. I should have thought that even Tories who are bothered about standards of conduct in public life would be concerned about what has happened.

Mr. Nigel Spearing (Newham, South): Could there not be a greater risk in respect of the London Docklands development corporation? Under clause 139 of the Bill, any Environment Minister can establish any new quango

"corporate to receive any property, rights or liabilities to be transferred by an order",

or—which is worse—

"amend, repeal or otherwise modify any enactment for the purpose of enabling any body established under any enactment to receive such property".

If that is not quango-making, what is? And those proposals involve people who have behaved in the way described by my hon. Friend over county hall. Moreover, the proposals are to be implemented by means of a negative instrument, without the agreement of Parliament. Would it not be better to ensure that the proposals are at least subject to parliamentary approval?

Mr. Dobson: I agree with my hon. Friend. His area has been affected by the doings—and undoings—of the London Docklands development corporation, and he is right to be concerned about what will happen now. About all that the corporation has left is real estate, and that may be handed over to the residuary body. There will not even be the restraints, or alleged restraints, that have been imposed on the LDDC in regard to the disposal of assets. As in this case, a Deputy Prime Minister could decide to sell them off to one of his mates in Japan.

The Bill does not make clear who will get the takings from the sale of assets by the new residuary bodies. I shall stand corrected if Ministers can tell me that it does make that clear. In the case of the Commission for the New Towns, many councils covering new towns would like some of the money to be used to bring up to scratch some of the new town housing taken over by them or by housing associations which needs to be improved.

Councils representing areas covered by urban development corporations and housing action trusts will want some of the funds to be ploughed back into the areas where land and buildings are located, rather than being siphoned into some more prosperous area. I am sure that my hon. Friends who represent constituencies in the docklands area will agree that at least some of the assets of the London Docklands development corporation, whether still in the hands of the development corporation or in the hands of the residuary body, should be used to benefit the area that they were established to benefit, not shifted off somewhere else, or even sold to some flag of convenience so that it can use the docks.

All in all, this ragbag of a Bill fails to meet the housing needs of the people of this country. It takes away rights from owner-occupiers, fails to implement properly sensible proposals in the Latham report and does not make the required changes in funding to urban and rural regeneration. Although it contains some proposals that we support, we shall vote against it—above all because it takes away the right to renovation grants of owner-occupiers and tenants.

6.29 pm

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on Second Reading of—I stress the title—the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Bill. It is interesting to follow the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson). Although I shall concentrate on parts II and III, I should like to offer the following opinion on housing grants. It seems to be sensible and fairer to move from a mandatory scheme for regeneration grants to a discretionary one, especially when the investment or the allocation of funding is to be maintained next year on this year. It also seems eminently sensible to give that discretion to local authorities, which will be able to co-ordinate better where the limited funding is going and direct it better to those on low incomes.

For example, in relation to the home energy efficiency scheme in part V, it seems quite absurd that under the original rules anybody over 60 years old could have received help, irrespective of their income. I am totally opposed to that concept—perhaps less so in the past few months since I became 60 myself. In all equity, we should concentrate what are limited resources where they are most needed. Those who disagree with that must answer yes or no, as they were invited to do, to the question whether they are going to increase the amount of funding.

On using right-to-buy receipts, I say to the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras that of course a proportion can be used, but if all the rest are used, they will only have to be replaced through higher council tax bills, since they are presently being used to meet the interest on local authorities' debts or to reduce those debts.

I declare an interest because I am a chartered and registered architect and can therefore be considered to have a direct interest in part III. I am, however, a non-practising architect and therefore have absolutely no financial interest in part III. Indeed, I have the opposite of a financial interest, because I pay what I consider to be substantial annual subscriptions to the Royal Institute of British Architects and the Architects Registration Council of the United Kingdom. I therefore have a financial interest in reverse. My hon. Friends may say that, because I am non-practising, it is only because of vanity that I pay those extraordinary amounts of money to be able to keep the letters after my name. I therefore concede one thing to the Opposition. I am the classic personification of the saying that the more letters a person has after his name, the less he knows about the subject.

In examining part II, relating to contractual relationships in the construction industry, it is worth reminding ourselves that we are talking about one of the largest industries in our country, whether measured in output or manpower. I am told that last year the construction industry dealt with £50,000 million-worth of new orders and that approximately 1.5 million people work in what we describe and define as the construction industry. To put it another way, the industry is responsible for 8 per cent. of this country's gross domestic product.

As all hon. Members will know, the construction industry is also very diverse, with many one-man firms and very many small firms. It has been plagued by disputes, as my hon. Friend the Minister said. I am very grateful to him for leading us through in a very understandable way what is not only a five-part Bill but one that necessarily deals with complicated and complex issues. The industry is also plagued by late payments. Perhaps in more than any other industry, cash flow is vital. Late payments disrupt many contracts for that cash-flow reason alone. For too long there has been a culture of "pay when paid"—to use the phrase that the Labour Front-Bench team has used—and, indeed, "pay if paid", which is even worse.

My hon. Friend the Minister mentioned the comparison with construction in the United States and called in aid many other statistics that have been gleaned from the Latham report. Relatively speaking, the industry is inefficient, uncompetitive and adversarial. There must be a better way in which to run such a huge industry. Fairer contractual arrangements are therefore essential and overdue. Equally, since the industry is a competing and conflicting one, consensus and co-operation are vital.

I take the view that the reason why the construction industry does not have the political clout in the corridors of power that it should have is simply that it cannot speak with one voice, unlike the car manufacturing industry, the farming industry, and so on. It has to get its own act together if it is to get its deserved political influence in this House.

I am very grateful and pleased that the Government and the industry have set up the inquiry, which produced the Latham report, "Constructing The Team", two years ago. I join my hon. Friend the Minister and the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras in their tributes to our erstwhile colleague Sir Michael Latham. His inquiry was most painstaking and an heroic effort considering the many previous inquiries that have been held into the industry, which did not—perhaps—have the results that we had hoped. He deserves the gratitude of us all. I am very mindful of the fact that he presented a package of measures rather than an à la carte menu from which we could pick one thing without the other. The report struck a balance between the competing interests and the disparate parts of the industry.

I must record a personal observation. I personally regret that the Bill does not deal with two of the important issues that Sir Michael identified: his recommendations on the introduction of trust funds and the need to tackle latent defects. There is a desperate need—I choose that adjective carefully—to amend the law of liability. My hon. Friend the Minister tells me that the Law Commission has looked into that. I hope that it will be able to bring forward proposals.

For example, it is quite wrong—perhaps this is special pleading—to lay on architects or designers, since not all designed buildings are designed by architects, unlimited liability. Such liability is against the interests not only of architects but of clients and other parts of the construction industry. However, I accept that there has been no consensus in the construction industry about such matters, so on balance I can understand why the Government have gone ahead with the Bill, excluding those two important points.

I accept that an essential ingredient of the Bill is the fact that, when the Government came to frame part II, they faced two particular problems. The first was alluded to by my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Sir P. Fry). What is the construction industry? Where do we draw its boundaries? There is no clear-cut division, as in so many things in life, between construction industry contracts and process engineering contracts. There is a grey area, as the debates in the other place underlined. More certainly, those who represent the process engineering industry were opposed to being included in part II.

The second problem was raised by the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras. I think that he was wrong on the matter. Undoubtedly, that will come out during the debate. The concept of adjudication is distinct from that of arbitration. That was perhaps not readily appreciated when the Bill was in its early forms of presentation. It is absolutely right to say that we must find some mechanism for dealing with disputes which arise during the contract. So much time and money has been wasted. The quicker adjudication process for disputes which arise during contract is very much to be welcomed, but it cannot be final and binding, which is the final act of arbitration.

Mr. Raynsford: I refer the hon. Gentleman to clause 107. Does he concede that the way in which it is currently phrased—parties may refer a dispute for "resolution" under the procedure—makes it difficult to see how the process can be short-term adjudication rather than the binding and final arbitration which many people have been worried will be the effect of the Government's proposals?

Sir Sydney Chapman: I do not have clause 107 in front of me, but my understanding is that, if both parties to a dispute agree that the adjudication is acceptable, that is the end of the matter. Perhaps more important, if that is not enshrined in clause 107 as it is currently drafted, my reading of the debates in the other place suggests that the Government will table an amendment to make it clear beyond any doubt. That raises the point that, on a complex and complicated Bill such as this, we need all the expertise we can get and it is a matter of working in co-operation and within consensus as far as we legitimately and politically can. If I have the misfortune to be selected to serve on the Committee which considers the Bill, that will be my overriding purpose. The rapid dispute resolution or adjudication, if unacceptable to one party, must go to arbitration at practical completion of the contract.

The third problem was the need to speed up the payments system. Delaying payments has been an art form in too many construction contracts. Payments have been delayed not only from the client to the contractor or from the contractor to the sub-contractor but from sub-contractor to sub-sub-contractor. As hon. Members on both sides of the House will know, there are often many sub-sub-contractors engaged in the building process. It is a minefield at the best of times. It is eminently sensible to introduce, first, the right of payment by instalments on all but the quick and short contracts and, secondly, mandatory payment timetables. While the details can be examined in Committee, I believe that the proposed "adequate mechanism" for payment must be defined.

I join my hon. Friend the Minister in welcoming the setting up of the Construction Industry Board. Many attempts have been made to do something similar in the past. The Group of Eight was one such attempt. At a more modest level, I was engaged with others in trying to introduce a construction industry umbrella group, but for one reason or another such bodies fall by the wayside, usually because the big boys in the industry want to have everything in their control. Sadly, we can see the same phenomenon even among the professionals in the construction industry. If the Royal Institute of British Architects proposes something, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors tends to demean it, or the other way round. I do not seek to make a pro-institute point one way or the other.

I am glad that my hon. Friend the Minister for Construction, Planning and Energy Efficiency is the person who has introduced the Bill. As I say, part II is very complex and relatively few people in the House have the experience of the construction industry that my hon. Friend has. Some years ago he was very much involved with the Federation of Civil Engineering Contractors.

I should like to mention a few points which relate to part III on architects' registration. I understand that I am the only architect in the House so I am perhaps an endangered species. As the Minister said, the Bill proposes that the Architects Registration Council of the United Kingdom should be vigorously amended. It is a cumbersome body. It was created in 1931 and it is separate from the main architects' institute, the Royal Institute of British Architects. I understand that about three quarters of the 30,000 qualified architects in the United Kingdom are members of RIBA or the equivalent Scottish or Northern Ireland body.

Most architects are self-employed or work in small practices. I do not think that my view will commend itself to all parties in the House or perhaps not even a majority of the House, but I should have preferred to see ARCUK abolished and all the regulation taken over by RIBA and its Scottish and Northern Ireland equivalents. I believe that most registered but non-chartered architects—those who are members of ARCUK but not RIBA—do not belong to RIBA because they do not want to pay the annual subscription of more than £200 a year.

If I had had my way, the problems would have been sorted out by abolishing ARCUK and transferring its responsibilities to RIBA, but forcing RIBA to take all registered architects as licentiate members of the institute, who would pay approximately the amount that they now pay to be members of ARCUK, but would not have the other rights, privileges or responsibilities of membership of RIBA. That would have been a much better way. That is, I think, what John Warne proposed in his report.

The RIBA is a prestigious professional body. It is well established. It has been in existence since 1834 and it is nationally known. It would have been the natural body for the self-regulation of architects. As hon. Members will know, self-regulation is practised by most professions in the country. I accept that the professional conduct, discipline or complaints committees of those professions have lay representatives, which is precisely what is proposed in the new set-up. I would have preferred that, but, as second best, I welcome the minimalist ARCUK, whose board is to be reduced from more than 70 members to 15, of whom only seven will be representatives of the architectural profession.

Many architects are uneasy that a majority of the 15—eight—will be lay people, representing consumer and public interest bodies. Architects have nothing to fear from that. If the seven architects are opposed to the majority of eight and cannot swing over one person, their cause may not be that strong.

It is right in this day and age that lay people should represent the consumer and public interest. Confidence is the keynote and I am sure that architects will accept that. It is certainly the trend in other professions. The General Medical Council is in the process of increasing the number of its lay members from 13 to 25, although I accept that it has 102 members. I do not know why it needs so many. Architects will lead so that other professions can follow in encouraging confidence among their clients and the public.

I mentioned John Warne's report, which got it half right. He was wrong to suggest that the protection of the word "architect" should be abolished. I disagree for the simple reason that architects do not enjoy a monopoly of building design. No one who wants to put up a building or structure has to employ the services of an architect. From a special pleading point of view, I wish that people had to, but they do not. People with no qualifications at all can call themselves building designers or even

architectural consultants. Only registered architects can call themselves architects. That is an important distinction that should be maintained because architects do not enjoy a monopoly.

I am grateful for being called. This is an omnibus Bill with five parts, 147 clauses and three schedules. I support the thrust of what the Government are doing. The Bill could not possibly deal with all matters relating to housing and nor does it seek to do so. The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras was a little unfair in his comments on that. I understand that it was originally to have been included with the Housing Bill. It was right to divide them and deal with the matter in two bites. I commend it to the House.

6.52 pm

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): Any Member of Parliament who goes around the country will know that the dominant problems that concern people are unemployment, the crisis of people's fears about housing and homelessness, dereliction and, for many people, despair. The Bill is supposed to be about housing and regeneration but will do absolutely nothing to deal with those problems. Clauses 124 and 125 deal with grants and I shall refer to them later. Homeless people and those worried about dereliction or their jobs—some of whom may work in the construction industry—who listened to the two Conservative Members who have spoken would wonder whether the Government and their supporters were totally out of touch.

On Sunday morning, I visited a group of people who went to a site owned by Guinness by Wandsworth bridge. Yesterday, 500 people turned up there to build a sustainable village. I hope that the House will bear with me in referring to that because it relates to the Bill. The site is 13 acres and has been derelict for seven years. It has been brilliantly and appropriately renamed "Pure Genius". It consists of an old oil depot and a distillery near the riverside. Near it are flats that are supposed to sell at £190,000 that people cannot afford to buy.

The group is called "The Land is Ours" and has spent six months bringing together architects, building craftsmen, plumbers, electricians and engineers. I met an unemployed soil scientist who told me that he worked at night as a cashier in a supermarket because he could not get a job as a soil scientist. Yesterday, 500 people turned up and began building their huts, lavatories, gardens and farms. It is the anniversary—this is something that few hon. Members will remember, although I certainly do—of the great occupation that took place in 1946, when demobilised service men occupied empty sites and began building for themselves.

The key question that the House must address is simple. Do we believe that the right to a home is a basic national right? Is it in the national interest that everyone should have a home of their own? Under the Liberal Government before the first world war, Lloyd George said that the nation's health was a national interest. I remember being told that after the second world war and thinking, "It's obvious; we've got the health service." However, it is not obvious now that the nation's health is in the national interest.

The House has never accepted—and the Bill does not accept—that people have rights to homes, though anyone in their senses knows that a good home underpins family life, protects people, provides an environment, and deals with many of the problems of law and order and crime. We must establish that the House believes, however long it takes, that everyone is entitled to a home. After the war, I remember Lord Woolton boasting that, if the Conservatives were elected, they would build 400,000 houses a year. They did pretty well in the 1951 general election on that promise.

The second question is, why is there homelessness? My hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) pointed to the negative equity figures and the number of people who were behind with their mortgages. My opinion is that homelessness is a necessary discipline of a capitalist society. If we walk along Embankment at night and see people in cardboard boxes, we think, "If I have row with my employer, get sacked, cannot keep up my mortgage and get repossessed, as 1,000 people a week are, I would be in a cardboard box." Unemployment is designed to frighten people into obedience, and homelessness is the final threat. We are sometimes told that fewer days are lost in industrial disputes than were lost under the last Labour Government. But if we take the days lost in industrial disputes and those lost through unemployment together, the figure is far, far higher than it was when Labour left office.

The whole argument about home ownership is a fraud. I go to public meetings—I did 171 last year—and I ask how many of the people there are home owners. Many people put up their hands, but when I ask how many have not got mortgages, they all put their hands down again. There are many home buyers and but few home owners. Home owners are free but home buyers who have mortgages that they cannot keep up suffer from all the fears that I have mentioned.

The country needs between 90,000 and 120,000 affordable homes a year. We have the necessary skills. There are 500,000 unemployed building workers. There are sites all over the place. In London alone, derelict sites cover an area as big as the borough of Westminster. We have the money. Do not tell us that if local authorities spent their £6 billion from the sale of council houses, they would have to raise the rates. They would get the money back. They would invest in housing and get the rents back. On that basis, it would be better for the authorities to sell off everything they own. It is time we addressed those questions.

I do not want to detain the House for long because I know that many other hon. Members want to speak. The main question is the ownership of land. I introduced a Bill 10 years ago to bring the land into common ownership. The first privatisation was the Enclosure Acts, which took common land and handed it to the large farmers. The highland clearances were the same. From the beginning of time, people in this country have had a feeling that the land belongs to them. Even Lloyd George said so. I remember his song about "the land, the land, the land on which we stand; why should we be paupers with the ballot in our hand? God gave the land for the people." In 1381, the Reverend John Ball said:

> "Things will not go well in England till all property is held in common".

In 1649, the Levellers said:

> "The land is a common treasury. It is a crime to buy and sell the land for private gain."

If we study the history of the subject, we find that the people feel that the land belongs to them.

[Mr. Tony Benn]

The argument about whether it is legal to occupy an empty site that is owned by Guinness does not concern me because, under the Heresy Act 1401, it was an offence to read the Bible. It was an offence to hold many religious opinions in the House and to argue for votes for women—Emmeline Pankhurst went to prison. It was an offence not to pay the poll tax. Although the House never likes to be reminded of its history, when people do something outside, it is ignored or laughed at, but it turns up a few years later as official policy. The Government are totally out of touch with what people feel, particularly young people.

Clause 124 is the reason why I can link my speech to the Bill. It states:

"The Secretary of State may, with the consent of the Treasury, give financial assistance to any person in respect of expenditure incurred in connection with activities which contribute to the regeneration or development of an area."

The activities are listed as:

"securing that land and buildings are brought into effective use",

"contributing to, or encouraging, economic development",

"creating an attractive and safe environment"—

that is what is happening at the Guinness site—

"preventing crime or reducing the fear of crime"—

that is what happens with that type of movement—and

"providing or improving housing or social or recreational facilities, for the purpose of encouraging people to live or work in the area or benefiting people who live there".

Those are the powers that are to be given to the Secretary of State and one of the comforts is that the present Secretary of State will be off in a few months. We shall have a Labour Government and my hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras, who made such a powerful speech, will have those powers at his disposal. I ask him to consider seriously encouraging people who need homes to take over derelict land and build sustainable villages of their own. Hon. Members may laugh, but they have laughed at everything from suffragettes to the Chartists and trade unions. They always laugh. That is their privilege, but history never records such views to be correct.

As the Bill passes through its various stages in the House, I hope that people throughout the country will follow the example of what is being done in London. Some of the people at the site came from Newbury and others have been involved in other campaigns. My message is: "If you want to bring pressure to bear on a Government, you mustn't wait for the legislation that you need, you must do it yourself." With fairly sympathetic media—something that has given me some pleasure and caused me some surprise in the past few days—people will realise that, if they want to end unemployment, homelessness, dereliction and despair, the best thing is to do it themselves and see how others will follow.

7.2 pm

Mr. Peter Thurnham (Bolton, North–East): First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister for Construction, Planning and Energy Efficiency on the enormous amount of work that he has done on the Bill. It is a great credit to him, and without his massive personal commitment it might not have come about. His sincere belief in the need to improve practices in the industry was evident in his speech. He made it clear that, without good contractual practices, there will not be any good subcontractors and, without them, efficiency gains in the industry, which are only too necessary, will not be possible.

My hon. Friend the Minister mentioned the work done by his staff. I can certainly endorse that. When I was Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for the Environment in 1992-93, the Department was concerned to do all that it could to improve matters in the construction industry. I am aware of the great input of staff in the Department; great credit is due to them.

This Bill is extremely important. Part II will affect the livelihood of many hundreds of thousands of people in the construction industry. Indeed, I should declare an interest, as it will affect me as a professional engineer. We just heard an excellent speech from the Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman), who declared a negative interest, I think—I am not sure how many people cease to practise as architects. I once heard a definition of an architect as someone whom one never employs twice, but perhaps it would be unfair to apply that too broadly. His speech illustrated the importance of having hon. Members in the House with a broad background, who can bring experience of an industry and speak as well as he did.

The Bill will also affect the 2,000 members of the Electrical Contractors Association, which I have been proud to represent for most of my 13 years in Parliament. The new Register of Members' Interests is published this afternoon. I believe that the House is much the better for having many hon. Members with a diverse range of interests and experience of the real world of work before they come here. We should certainly avoid encouraging a Parliament full of career politicians, who demand higher and higher salaries for Members. It is far better to have hon. Members who are not solely dependent on parliamentary salaries and have a wide range of interests in the world outside. I was nearly turned down as a foster father because the social services thought that my parliamentary income was far too insecure. I was passed as fit only because I was a professional engineer with another income.

It is only right that trade associations should be properly and openly represented in Parliament. The Electrical Contractors Association is, I am glad to say, one of the strongest associations in the country, with a record of representing the best interests of the specialist construction industry as a whole. For instance, the electrical contractors' training and apprenticeship schemes are acknowledged to be the best in the country, bar none.

Much consultation has taken place and, as the Minister said, great credit is due to Sir Michael Latham, whom the Department of the Environment so wisely chose to head the team and whose report is the foundation for the Bill. Sir Michael achieved a great deal more than many people thought possible. We are all indebted to him because the industry plays such an important part in the economy, representing nearly 10 per cent. of gross national output. If a 30 per cent. improvement in efficiency were possible, it would give a 3 per cent. boost to that output.

The ECA, with some 2,000 member firms and 50,000 employees, is a major constituent of the Constructors Liaison Group, which represents specialist sub-contractors

in the construction industry. The CLG welcomes the main provisions of part II of the Bill so far as they embrace the recommendations of the Latham report, but wants the Government to go further than the changes already suggested during the Bill's progress in another place.

First, on the definition of the industry and the question of scope in part II, the process industries should be included. I am a little uncertain why they are not, but perhaps the Government lack confidence in the Bill. It is a good Bill and, therefore, the more of the industry that it embraces the better. We should not hang back. The work that specialist subcontractors do in the process industries is just the same as the work that they do in the rest of the construction industry. It is fair to say that there is a difference with the process industries, in that they are not speculative as some building is—the process industries do not put up towers like Canary Wharf—so that sector of the industry is rather more secure and stable. That does not mean to say, however, that it is a utopia for sub-contractors.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will think again about extending the scope of the Bill so that sub-contractors are in no doubt that the work that they do for process industry contractors will be embraced in the same way as the Bill embraces their work elsewhere. As things stand, sub-contractors face the same sort of free for all when working in the process industry as they do elsewhere in the construction industry. It is important, therefore, to include the process industries fully in the Bill.

Off-site work and steel work should be included in the Bill. Modern processes, which often lead to more work being done off site, should not for some strange reason be excluded from the excellent provisions of the Bill.

Maintenance and repair, which according to the Department's own definition account for more than 50 per cent. of the industry's output, should also be included. It is currently unclear whether it is included. Perhaps the Minister will clarify in his reply whether maintenance repair is included and will also deal with the issue of design.

Adjudication, which arises under clause 107, has already been mentioned. I am certainly pleased with the way in which the Minister has taken account of the representations made in the other place, and I believe that we are now getting nearer to a workable definition. It is still important that we have tighter definitions so that we can be absolutely clear about how the adjudication process will work and can avoid confusion over arbitration. The Government are well aware of the strength of the points made by Lord Ackner when he spoke very well on that matter in the other place, stressing the rubric of "pay now, argue later" as the basis for adjudication rather than arbitration. It is very important that we have a completely clear distinction on that point.

I accept the Minister's argument that the draft scheme is much better kept as a statutory instrument and that the Government will have time to consult more fully on it in the autumn after the Bill becomes law. I was a bit concerned when the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) said that he would do all that he could to stop the Bill. I am not sure whether he was referring to the entire Bill or only to parts of it, but I certainly look forward to seeing it on the statute book. I hope that Opposition Members will confine their opposition to certain parts of the Bill and will not try to stop it completely. The excellent measures that it proposes will be welcomed and should become law sooner rather than later. I hope that the Opposition will understand that point.

It is essential that the Government get the draft scheme right. Therefore, they should consult fully and properly on it. As a statutory instrument, it will be open to amendment at a later date more easily than if it were part of the Bill.

The payment issue is causing the most concern to sub-contractors because it is the key to survival for small firms; it is life or death for them. For large firms, it may not matter very much whether an adjudication, arbitration or legal action goes one way or the other. It may be uncomfortable if large firms lose an action, but they will survive it, whereas it is a matter of absolute survival for small firms. It is therefore essential that the definitions are very clear.

We are confused about clause 108. We do not see why 60 days should come into the matter. The CLG would like subsection (1) to be deleted. It cannot see any sense in having a 60-day threshold in the first place. I have never heard of such a thing, and would be happy for it to be 30 days—which is the normal arrangement. There seems to be no need for that subsection at all.

Clauses 109 and 110 require much better definition to ensure that they work properly. As I said, it is absolutely vital for small firms to know that the provisions will work properly. It would be a disaster if the Bill reached the statute book and enabled clever lawyers employed by large firms to outwit small firms because of provisions that had not been properly thought through. Amendments have been proposed by the CLG. The Government are aware of the amendments, and I hope that they will feel able to introduce them as Government amendments in Committee.

It is essential that payment mechanisms are properly developed and provisions on debt are clearly established. It is not clear from the Bill exactly when a debt would become a debt and how the payment mechanism would work.

Clause 112 covers the ignominious practice of "pay when paid". That practice has existed for some years, but it has recently become more prevalent. Once it starts in an industry, it spreads right through because each person feels that he must pass on the practice to the next person in the chain, so that the whole industry becomes riddled with it. It is perhaps the most important clause in the Bill, as long as it works properly.

It is again felt that better definitions are needed, as there may be ways in which some people may be able to avoid the Bill's provisions. It is essential that that bad practice is eliminated from the industry, and it is much to the Government's credit that they are introducing the Bill so that this, of all the worst practices, will be eliminated. It will do more than anything else to improve sub-contractors' sense of security. They need the certainty of cash flow to be able to pay their wages.

I am uncertain where the Government stand on the question of trust funds, which formed a very important part of Sir Michael Latham's recommendations. If I remember rightly, he said that he did not want his recommendations cherry-picked, and that they should be taken on board as a whole. I hope that the Government

[Mr. Peter Thurnham]

will feel able to consider including trust funds and that, if amendments are tabled in Committee, the Government will feel able to consider them positively—or, ideally, to table their own amendments to make trust funds a reality.

Trust funds would deal with the whole problem of pay when paid because, if the money is there, it can flow through and the fear of insolvency does not need to arise.

I have confined my remarks principally to part II of the Bill, with which I have been most concerned, but all the Bill's provisions are important. I am interested in the provisions on disabled facilities grants. I noticed that many of the Bill's measures have been widely welcomed, but I know from my experience that there is a need to improve some procedures, certainly in relation to assessment.

A year or two ago, I was asked to help a constituent of mine who had been turned down for a shower seat because he lacked sufficient priority. When I went to see him, I found that he was a double-amputee. He had no legs, but he was considered to be an insufficient priority to have a shower seat. He was still registered by social services as having one leg. That is one example of how assessment procedures can be way behind what they should be. It is essential that we improve the way in which people are assessed and the speed with which it is done.

I do not know whether the Government will be able to re-examine the problem of part M building regulations applying to new homes. I understand that it would cost about only £200 to £300 for the regulations to apply to each new house, which seems to be an affordable figure. It is, of course, much less than the cost of altering a house at a later date.

I do not know whether there will be an opportunity for me to serve on the Committee, but I certainly wish the Bill well in its progress through Committee. I look forward to it coming back to the House on Report and Third Reading.

7.17 pm

Mrs. Diana Maddock (Christchurch): Housing is a key element of our infrastructure because for the majority of families their house is the single biggest purchase they will make in their lives. Between us, we spend more than £30 billion a year on housing in the United Kingdom, and 30 per cent. of our total wealth is in housing. As hon. Members have already said in this debate, decent homes are the anchor for successful families and successful individuals.

Housing is a part of the construction industry, which is a key element in our national economy. In 1995, construction output was worth £52.5 billion or 8.5 per cent. of our gross domestic product. That is why this Bill is so important, and why the Housing Bill which had its Third Reading last week is also so important. I fear, however, that both pieces of legislation suffer from the same problem, because many of the issues that the Government claim to be dealing with will not be solved by changing priorities or by moving the goalposts. They will primarily be solved by increasing investment and enabling long-term financial planning. For that, we need an improvement in financial confidence—in fact, we need that elusive feel-good factor about which we hear so much.

Part I of the Bill deals with grants and needs to be considered against the condition of existing housing. The last major review of the state of our housing was the English house conditions survey conducted in 1991 and published two years later. The survey showed that at that time almost 1.5 million dwellings in England were unfit and that well over 1 million more were in need of substantial repair. That describes the condition of 2.6 million properties, or more than 13 per cent. of the housing stock in England. About 5 million people are currently living in those properties, three quarters of them in the private sector.

Local authorities and housing associations have generally achieved a steady improvement in the condition of their properties, but most reported a deterioration in the condition of private sector properties. If anything, the situation appears to have got worse since 1991. Many local authorities submitted reports for last year's annual survey conducted by the National Home Improvement Council. Councils had found higher levels of unfitness than they had expected from their interpretation of the 1991 survey.

The NHIC said that rural local authorities in particular have found that the situation had got very much worse. In fact, some rural local authorities found levels of unfitness in homes that were twice as high as indicated in the 1991 house conditions survey. The NHIC survey highlighted a number of concerns, one of which related to homes in multiple occupation. Some local authorities reported that 80 per cent. to 90 per cent of houses in multiple occupation in their areas were unfit. In fact, the private rented sector in general was found by a majority of authorities to be deteriorating badly. That is very bad news, because the Housing Bill that we debated only last week will place more people in that sector.

As might be expected, very high levels of unfitness and disrepair were found in homes built before the first world war, but what concerned many authorities is the indication of a very sharp decline in the standard of inter-war property. A number of authorities told the NHIC that many people did not seem to be aware of how bad a state their properties were in. That was especially true of elderly people, people on low incomes and people living in rural areas. One council reported that more than four fifths of people living in unfit homes had said that they thought that their living conditions were generally satisfactory, and that was despite the fact that there were clear signs that their health was probably suffering as a result of the condition of their dwelling. That is very depressing.

Even when people apply for home improvement grants, they have to wait a long time. The NHIC survey found that the average wait was three years but that in some areas people were having to wait 15 years for a grant. As for discretionary grants, most councils said they were able to provide them only for very restricted purposes and on very restricted budgets. Some authorities ran out of money in June, only three months into the financial year.

Many bodies, including the NHIC, were critical of the Government's White Paper, and I shall read out one or two of the comments that have been made. The Chartered Institute of Housing said that, despite regular surveys of the housing stock, no assessment is made of the resource input needed to deal with the backlog of disrepair revealed. The Association of District Councils and the Association of Metropolitan Authorities felt that the

White Paper was narrow in that it failed to attempt any strategic assessment of the repair needs of the sector. Even the Council of Mortgage Lenders said:

"This consultation paper signals a further reduction in the public resources made available to assist the repair and maintenance of private properties even though there is known to be a significant unmet demand."

There is therefore a widespread opinion that the Government are not tackling the real problem.

I represent a constituency that contains very many elderly people. I was therefore especially worried by the points made to me and, I am sure, to other hon. Members, by Age Concern. Age Concern is disappointed that the Government do not intend to extend part M of the building regulations. It is also concerned about the removal of the right to mandatory grants because it believes that that could lead to older people living in unfit housing for long periods.

The harmful effects of poor housing are well documented. Dampness leads to bronchial and respiratory illnesses; cold homes lead to hypothermia and increased susceptibility to other illnesses; and unsafe housing can lead to accidents and death. Various estimates have been made of how much we spend treating people suffering from the effects of cold and damp housing. One estimate is £800,000 but another is well over £1 billion.

Age Concern recognises that local authorities are not meeting their duty to award even mandatory grants, but it does not believe that scrapping them is the answer. Like other bodies, it wants a clear national strategy and adequate resources to tackle the problem of unfit housing. Age Concern and other bodies are also worried about grants for the disabled. Age concern is especially worried as 71 per cent. of such grants are given to people aged 60 or over.

Although grants for disabled people will remain mandatory, local authorities will be able to defer payment for up to 12 months. If people need the grant when it is approved but do not get it then, they may not be able to stay in their own homes, and it may well cost the state more to provide care for them elsewhere. As the hon. Member for Bolton, North–East (Mr. Thurnham) said, waiting for assessment is another problem.

Everyone agrees that there is a lack of occupational therapists. There have been various suggestions about how we might deal with the problem. When the matter was discussed in another place, the possibility that general practitioners might be used in some cases was considered. The case of the double amputee who needed a seat in his shower, cited by the hon. Member for Bolton, North–East, illustrates the problem. I hope the Minister will listen in Committee to the concerns that have been expressed and try to do something about them, because the system is not working terribly well at the moment.

Mr. Robert B. Jones: I have been listening carefully to the hon. Lady and I did not want to interrupt her flow. I guarantee that we shall consider all the issues that have been raised, but I must correct something that she said. She said that we had decided not to extend part M of the regulations. In fact, we are still analysing the huge response to the consultation and we shall make a decision when we have finished.

Mrs. Maddock: I am grateful for that information about part M. My perception, and that of others, is that this has been going on for a long time. The Bill provided an opportunity to solve the problem, but that has not been done. However, I welcome the Minister's comments and look forward to the Government's decision.

I recognise that the Government have listened to some of the concerns expressed and made some changes to the Bill in another place. One change related to the length of time that someone has to be living in a house to get a grant. The matter is still controversial—one has to have been living in a house for three years before becoming eligible. Baroness Hamwee said in another place that that can be a disincentive and that there should be more discretion for local authorities to decide these matters. I know that the Minister has provided further discretion and that in some cases the local authority can waive the qualifying period. However, basically the situation remains the same. Grants should be an incentive to improve and to repair properties—there should not be hurdles to prevent people from doing that.

I welcome the fact that disabled people who live in park homes will now be eligible for grants. The Minister knows that I share his interest in people who live in park homes, and he very kindly included them in the Home Energy Conservation Act 1995, which I piloted through the House. For too long, owners of mobile homes have been treated as second-class home owners. I have an enormous number of such people in my constituency, many of whom are elderly and on fixed incomes and have been unable to apply for disabled facilities. This provision is long overdue. I may be ruled out of order for saying this, but I would like the Minister to commit himself to reforming the whole of the mobile homes legislation, although perhaps that is for another day.

Part II of the Bill aims to provide fairer contractual arrangements. Many hon. Members have spoken at great length on this and I join them in paying tribute to Sir Michael Latham. He has done a tremendous job. However, one or two problems still remain, some of which have been highlighted today. The construction industry needs a hand. For example, since June 1991, 81,000 construction workers have lost their jobs in the south-east and East Anglia. If those people were back at work, the Exchequer would be £729 million better off in social security payments and taxes and this would save up to half the cost of building. The Trades Union Congress has suggested that every new construction job creates two more jobs elsewhere in the local economy, which is why it is so important. Even if that were only half true, the money spent on building would be recouped almost immediately.

We are told that the economy is growing—indeed, some Ministers believe that it is booming—but construction is 8 per cent. below its 1990 peak level. Unemployment in the construction sector is 12.2 per cent., against a national average of 8.5 per cent. It is estimated that, in the first half of this year, 20,000 jobs will have gone in the construction industry.

The output graph from the industry shows a series of peaks and troughs over recent years. It is vital that we have economic stability and regulations which help rather than hinder the industry. Completions have been dropping since 1988. Unfortunately, negative equity and job insecurity do not allow the market to benefit from lower prices and interest rates. If we add to this Government cuts in housing, in road construction and in health, we can see that the problems are getting worse.

[Mrs. Maddock]

The Bill will not address the underlying problems. However, we welcome some aspects of the Bill, particularly when it comes to Latham. I remember being a councillor and looking at competitive tendering. I was concerned that we were discouraged from taking quality into account when we looked at tenders—and in some cases we were actually not allowed to take it into account. The resolution of disputes will be examined.

I welcome the fact that there is more emphasis on research and development and on raising standards and skills. That is particularly important in relation to energy conservation. We have heard a lot of this before, but what guarantee do we have that it will happen? We already know that measures to clarify liabilities for building defects have been dropped. This afternoon we have heard that that issue has been referred to the Law Commission.

With regard to payment of debts, we all know that small businesses, in particular, need regular payments to keep their cash flows healthy. I am surprised that I am the first to mention the confusion about where the Government stand on this issue. The Deputy Prime Minister claimed that he improved his cash flow tremendously at the expense of small businesses, but the Economic Secretary took an opposite view. There are still matters in the Bill that need to be resolved and many bodies are still concerned about this.

There is a new right for parties to a contract to refer disputes about payments to an independent adjudicator. However, the way in which the adjudication scheme will work remains a mystery and will be revealed after consultation. I know that several bodies are still concerned about one or two aspects of this. Like other hon. Members, I have received correspondence from the Institute of Civil Engineers, which feels that the Government are confused about what is arbitration and what is adjudication. It is also concerned about suspension of contracts and performance. I am sure that those matters will be raised in the Standing Committee. It is obvious that there are still problems, despite going a long way towards implementing Latham.

Part III of the Bill relates to the registration of architects. It is remarkable that the Government have changed their mind at least twice on this issue. However, we have had good input from Conservative Members on this. It is essential that a registration scheme should cover the full range of practising architects.

Part IV refers to regeneration. The Government claim that they are giving local authorities wider powers to deal with regeneration schemes, but resources continue to dwindle. Who is running local government? There are no longer many councils run by the Conservatives, but we know where they are going to put the blame, despite the fact that much of the money will come from central Government. It is a good thing that local authorities can give relocation grants in clearance areas, but where are the resources to come from? Once again, the guidance notes are yet to be issued by the Secretary of State.

Part V deals with miscellaneous and general provisions. I was surprised that the Minister did not mention the home energy efficiency scheme in his opening speech. I know that the Minister is interested in this scheme and I am grateful to him for his help with the Home Energy Conservation Act that I steered through the House last year. If it were not for his commitment, I am sure that that Act would not be on the statute book now—and I do not detract from that.

However, the Minister must be acutely embarrassed by what happened in the Budget last year when it came to spending on the home energy efficiency scheme: one third of the budget was cut. When one looks at how much that is in terms of the amount that the Government spend, one sees that it was extremely mean, and it has been met with anger and astonishment by every group involved in energy efficiency, the elderly and other people suffering from fuel poverty.

Pensioners are more likely than any other households to own inefficient, old and poorly maintained heating appliances, and to use expensive fuels such as on-peak electricity and solid fuel fires. Forty per cent. of households headed by a person who is aged over 75 live in energy-inefficient homes. When I read the NHIC survey results I was surprised—perhaps I should not have been—to see that quite a few authorities are providing grants to help householders with energy conservation work on their homes, despite the availability of the HEES grants. The justification was the selectiveness and limited nature of HEES grants, a problem that will only get worse as a result of the cuts introduced by the Government last year and some of the new regulations introduced by the Bill.

I hope that the Minister will give hon. Members some indication as to where he stands on this issue. I know that he is a strong supporter of energy efficiency. I hope that he can lean rather more heavily on the Government. I hope that the Minister will be able to be constructive in Committee. I concur strongly with the comments made by the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) about what a Committee can do for a Bill and the constructive way in which people work. I know the Minister will have as his aides Ministers who worked with me and others on previous housing legislation, which we improved.

The construction industry badly needs our support. We must deal with the backlog of repair and unfitness in our housing stock. Every time I talk about housing in the House, I talk about the sorts of policies that the Liberal Democrats would like to see. We believe that councils should be allowed to spend their capital receipts and that they should have the freedom to act on and solve the problems of bad housing in their areas.

We would like the way in which the public sector borrowing requirement is calculated to be reformed because we need to distinguish between capital and revenue. We need to ensure that we can show in the accounts that investment in long-term infrastructure is a good thing. The Chartered Institute of Housing has considered that requirement in some detail and conferred with other financial institutions about it. They have concluded that, if such changes were made, more money would be available to spend on housing and on infrastructure.

We need to do more than the Bill, which merely moves the goalposts. We need a clear national strategy, backed with adequate resources, to tackle the problems of unfit housing. Above all, we need to give another impetus to the construction industry, which so badly needs our support.

7.39 pm

Mr. Den Dover (Chorley): It is a real pleasure to speak in a debate opened by my hon. Friend the Minister for Construction, Planning and Energy Efficiency, who has such invaluable and detailed knowledge of the subject. I pay tribute to his experience, which was revealed not least by his response in the past few days to the requirements of the construction industry, which revealed that he has a proper idea of what it requires.

I support what my neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, North-East (Mr. Thurnham) said about mandatory disabled grants, which are not properly assessed. A lot of work needs to be done by local authorities to ensure that council officers assess a person's case independently and fairly to identify the need and how quickly provision should be made available. After all, the handicapped and the disabled need every help that we can possibly give them. It is right and proper that the disabled, whose need is urgent, will get a larger share of the grant available under the Bill and I welcome that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) spoke about the Architects Registration Council. It is a good thing that the Government did not allow it to be abolished two or three years ago. I welcome the fact that, since then, the council's activities have been freshened up and greatly improved. The introduction of an independent or lay person on the board of that council is especially welcome because architects work in the real world and they serve an array of building clients from the public and private sectors. It is therefore right and proper that those clients—the lay members—should be represented on the Architects Registration Council. That move is long overdue. The Bill will address the problem caused by the fact that there are far too many professional members of that council.

Hon. Members have already said that the relocation grants that will be available to many of our constituents are an excellent prospect. Far too often, people have had to move out from the towns and cities where they wanted to stay, where there were schools for their children and where they played a full part in their community. It is right that they should be given assistance to ensure that they can stay in their towns and continue to play a part in their community. It is also right that that money should be targeted at that objective.

The streamlining of the legislation relating to the single regeneration budget is welcome. Many items of Government legislation relate to that budget and those responsible for it have a mammoth task in deciding between competing schemes up and down the country. However, far too little money and resources are available to tackle the problems of dereliction. The only way that they will be provided is to ensure that we get value for money.

I am therefore all in favour of urban challenges comprising groups, particularly those involving the private and public sectors, which put forward their best ideas for the money on offer. Such partnerships will offer the best value for money and ensure that the problems of dereliction are well and truly overcome. I therefore welcome the forward-thinking, positive ideas in the Bill.

A number of hon. Members have rightly spoken in favour of the home energy efficiency scheme. The number of pensioners in my constituency who have benefited from that scheme over the years is unbelievable. The money invested gives a tremendous return by reducing heating bills straight away. In the past, that scheme has involved loft insulation as well as the draught-proofing of doors and windows. It has been an absolutely marvellous use of public money because it has enhanced people's quality of life as well as reduced their heating bills. Its operation has ensured that we have targeted resources onto to those most in need. That scheme also generated labour-intensive activities in the construction industry at a difficult time when work was scarce.

Some adverse comment has been made about the activities of residuary bodies. I have always found them to be responsive. I admit that they are not elected, but they have done a marvellous job in collecting assets of all kinds and using them, selling them off or off-loading them. Okay, we have heard about the sale of county hall in London, but at least that site has been put to use earlier than was expected and money has been generated from the sale of flats. I pay tribute to the London residuary body.

There is an urgent need for such a residuary body to take over the work of the urban development corporations and the Commission for the New Towns when they wind down. I was a prime mover in getting the UDCs set up, and I pay tribute to their marvellous work. They have had unique powers because they have been able to buy and amass land and give themselves planning permission. They have transformed the centres of Manchester, Leeds and Newcastle, and even Trafford Park, which is outside Manchester. They have brought jobs to those areas, improved the housing stock and the general infrastructure. I have nothing but praise for their activities. In terms of public sector spending, however, everything should have a limited life. When those bodies were set up, it was always assumed that they would be wound up after five or eight years when they had fulfilled their job.

It is right that the Commission for the New Towns and the UDCs should be wound down in the next few years and it is necessary that there be a body charged with the task of off-loading those organisations' assets. After all, those organisations held land when it was easy to dispose of it, unlike now, and certainly not at the high boom prices of the past. I have every confidence that any residuary body or bodies set up to take over the huge job of the UDCs and the Commission for the New Towns will do it well on behalf of the Government.

Part II is the backbone of the Bill, and rightly so. I should like to add my compliments to the tributes paid to Sir Michael Latham. He has done a super job in the past few years, as he did as a Member of Parliament for many years, to make sure that the voice of the construction industry is heard. He has managed that because of his wealth of experience, which he has in spades.

Sir Michael's report concentrated on trust and team work, of which there has been far too little in the construction industry. That lack has been disastrous, because the construction industry has an extremely bad reputation. I am not surprised that we must sharpen our act to catch up with countries in the far east, the middle east, the Americas and Europe. I am not convinced, however, that 30 per cent. cost savings are possible. I am sure that that estimate took into account the enormous legal bills that would be saved because of less and less litigation—an undoubted effect of the Bill. In future, we need to ensure that the client is confident that he will get what he wanted, at a reasonable cost and in reasonable time.

[Mr. Den Dover]

When I was chief executive of the National Building Agency—a Government quango—25 to 28 years ago, we were often brought in to sort out public building projects, such as huge hospital projects, that were running over on time by two or three times the construction period and running over two or three times on budget. Admittedly, that was a time of high inflation, but the construction industry would simply wind up and grind down to zero work load if it carried on like that.

Even in today's climate, some building contractors are famed for their use of claims. On any site, if a building contractor has a proper estimate and performs well, he will hit the target date for completion and come within budget. Many contractors are disorganised and inefficient, and expect to milk the client afterwards by using their claims department to make enormous claims that bear no relationship to the clauses of the contract, which do allow extensions of time for weather and all sorts of things, some with costs and some without costs. They make such claims and expect to obtain that money as of right.

The legal profession has fed very well on that system for many years. What I admire about Sir Michael Latham is the fact that he is cutting through all that and calling time on a process that should have disappeared years ago. It will mean a greater work load in the industry, more trust and more team work. The industry will have a better reputation and our export opportunities throughout the world will be enhanced. We have some of the best building and civil engineering firms in this country. They are in export markets and do extremely well, but they will do better if they are able to abide by the rules set out in the Bill.

I shall now discuss those rules. I mentioned to the Minister the possibility that the process engineering industry should be in the scope of the Bill. Perhaps he would give it one last thought before he keeps it out. I admire the fact that there has been a very small amount of litigation—that is superb. Why change something that is a success? It might have some rationale if most, if not all, construction contracts fell into the ambit of the Bill. Then there would be no uncertainty.

I share the misgivings of my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mr. Coombs) about the adjudication process. He asked a valid question, to which I hope that the Minister will give further thought—who decides whether the adjudication terms and payment terms in the contract drawn up between employer and contractor are reasonable and adequate? That is a very important matter. If I, as a building client, want to start work and am ready to sign the contract, but someone empowered to do so jumps in and says, "Sorry; I do not think that the adjudication and payment terms are adequate," I might easily have a delay, as soon as the legal profession comes in, of two or three months without even trying.

On the needs of the industry, I was delighted to have put into my hands today a superb letter, dated 2 May 1996, from the Minister to Sir Michael Latham, which came to me through the hands of the Construction Industry Council. I wish that it had been made available to hon. Members on both sides of the House, because Opposition Members are working under the misapprehension that several of the items mentioned in it have not been addressed. I shall briefly skim through some of those.

First, the professions in the industry—especially those whose members might act as adjudicators—do not take kindly to the thought that they may have to try to obtain professional indemnity insurance if they act as adjudicators. A sentence on the final page of the letter gives them tremendous comfort. It says:

"we have provided adjudicators with protection against liability for their decisions so long as they act in good faith. The point made to the Government was that it might be difficult to recruit adjudicators without that provision. We agree."

I agree entirely. Adjudicators will play a key role in the workings of the Bill, and they need to act in good faith, in their professional capacity. It is essential that they do not feel that the ground will be cut from under them, that they have no professional indemnity insurance and that they might have all their assets called in. If they do not have those fears, they will be able to do their best.

Debate has been played out about the period for adjudication and about whether the findings of the adjudicator are binding. The various organisations in the industry have said, "We need a reasonable time for the adjudicator to reach a decision"—perhaps the period in the original scheme was too short—"and we do not want his decisions to be final and binding."

I shall quote again from the letter at some length, because the matter is very important:

"The adjudication mechanism described in the Scheme included a provision for adjudicators to make binding decisions (on the principle that it might be helpful to get small disputes resolved once and for all); it also enabled parties to agree at the outset that a dispute could be reopened after practical completion of a contract for final resolution in arbitration or before the Courts.

I recognise that the adjudication procedure which we put forward in the draft Scheme has caused some concern in the industry not least because it was feared that it might not achieve the objective of securing a rapid resolution of disputes. We have now made it clear that the statutory consultation on the Scheme will be on the basis that adjudication will require parties to abide by an adjudicator's decision during the period of a contract but that either party would be able to reopen the dispute thereafter, so long as a proper notification has been given within a set period."

I hope that Opposition Members fully accept that that settles their misgivings. If they have do not have a copy of that letter, I hope that they will get it in the next few minutes or so.

Mr. Raynsford: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He will of course understand that all these misgivings and anxieties would not have occurred in the first place if the scheme, as originally proposed by the Government, had not given rise to considerable doubts and concerns. There remain problems, such as the one that I have highlighted in the wording of clause 107, which will need to be considered very carefully to ensure that we have a workable scheme that is acceptable to the whole industry. That must be the objective.

Mr. Dover: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman. We now have the statutory consultation process, which will be carried on after Royal Assent. I pressed the Minister on that earlier.

Mr. Robert B. Jones: Throughout, the problem has been that the construction industry was prepared to sign up to general propositions but we could not flush out the detail. It required the draft scheme to focus the minds of those in the industry on what they wanted and did not

want, and it has enabled us to end up with something broadly acceptable. There may still be points that we need to resolve and we are perfectly willing to continue discussion with the industry and outside to try to do so if at all possible.

Mr. Dover: The industry has pondered long and hard about detailed wording. I am a civil engineer by profession, and the wording that the Institution of Civil Engineers sent to the Minister in the past seven days will need to be very carefully examined; I think that it is perfect. The institution also has a very good idea on the payment provisions, which I shall discuss later.

It is in the interests of all parties in the House, the construction industry and the nation to ensure that we get the right legal framework. If we have to take another few weeks or months—even after Royal Assent—so be it. At least there will be a consultation process. I very much welcome the Minister's statement earlier that we shall be able to debate those regulations in the House. That will give us a first-class opportunity to ensure, with some hindsight, that the thing is properly worked out in detail, which is extremely important.

The usual standard contracts used between client and contractor contain full payment conditions, specifying payment periods, but the Bill concentrates on special contracts between, say, the main contractor and his subcontractors. They are sometimes swingeing and very unfair. Sub-contractors fall into all sorts of financial traps, and they often have to stay on the job and see the contract out even though they are not being paid. I welcome the fact that the Bill addresses insolvency and that there will be a fair payments system and a test which presumably people must comply with from the start. Payments must be made properly at the right intervals.

I would like to suggest one amendment proposed by the Institution of Civil Engineers: that the word "valid" be inserted before the word "ground" in clauses 110(a) and 110(b). The institution suggests that companies who withdraw their effort from a site because of non-payment must notify the adjudicator named and agreed under the contract of their decision, giving valid reasons for withdrawing their labour. In other words, a firm cannot say, "I am a sub-contractor on the job, but I am not happy so I shall withdraw my labour," without valid grounds. I hope that the Minister will consider allowing the adjudicator to make a pronouncement and determine whether valid grounds should taken into consideration when drawing up contracts.

In conclusion, the Bill represents a major step forward for the industry. I appreciate not only the craft and the care that has gone into the Bill's preparation, arising out of Sir Michael Latham's report, but the tremendous number of hours and days of discussion of it in the House of Lords. It is unusual for major legislation to come to the House following consideration in the other place. The House of Lords has done much to carve out the right form of words in part II of the Bill and I hope that the Standing Committee will examine it even more carefully. The Bill contains many good ideas and it will be a tragedy if Opposition Members seek to divide the House on a measure that is useful to the entire construction industry. I support all its provisions.

8.1 pm

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke–on–Trent, North): It is important to recognise that the Bill could well be important for the construction industry, and I am sure that there was a great deal of technical consultation before its presentation. I hope that the legislation will also advantage manufacturers in my constituency who make bricks and who are involved in the sanitary and tableware industries.

My principal concern—which is relevant to how Opposition Members will vote this evening—is whether the Bill addresses the unmet housing need in constituencies across the country. I represent many people who urgently need housing of one kind or another, and my hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) made it clear earlier that the Bill does not address that existing need.

We have heard much tonight about the single regeneration budget—the SRB—and how it will benefit those who live in houses that are in need of attention. Although the Government have allocated some resources to the SRB—I refer to the Cobridge SRB in my constituency—that is no substitute for regular maintenance and proper mandatory grants. That funding is necessary in a constituency such as mine where about 7,000 people are owner occupiers and a large proportion of them—63 per cent.—are elderly.

As we move towards the new millennium, we must put on the statute book basic standards for new-build houses. We must address issues such as home safety, energy efficiency, environmental sustainability and housing for the generations. Earlier today, the Government informed us that we must expect to pay for our care in old age—although we thought that our national insurance contributions would meet that cost. It is significant that the Government have said nothing about care in the community. The fact that, as we approach the new millennium, we cannot apply design standards to new-build houses in order to make them fit for habitation by future generations says a lot about the Government's failure to address the country's housing crisis.

That failure is my main concern: the Government cannot get their housing policy right. We are debating the Bill this evening because the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 has failed. It came into effect in July 1990 and it should have provided mandatory grants to those who needed them. Earlier today, my hon. Friend spelled out some basic housing regulations. Many people do not have indoor WCs or wind and watertight roofs over their heads. Is it asking too much for those people to be entitled to mandatory grants?

With the exception of provision for the disabled, the Government have insisted upon moving away from providing decent housing and mandatory grants. I am very alarmed about the direction in which the Government are heading. Many Labour-controlled councils around the country desperately want to help those who need mandatory grants, but they are not able to do so because the Government have not provided the funding. The Government are aware of that problem, but they refuse to allow local councils to award mandatory grants. That is a telling point.

I shall refer briefly to my constituency and to the city of Stoke-on-Trent which I and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke–on–Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson)

[Ms Joan Walley]

represent. The Minister kindly visited north Staffordshire recently to see the housing problems at first hand. Following that visit, we were grateful to receive an extra allocation of £300,000 which was made available to deal with housing problems in Stoke-on-Trent. That funding is very helpful, but it does not go far enough.

Stoke-on-Trent city council needs £10 million simply to satisfy the number of outstanding mandatory grants and to meet the needs of 1,000 people who are on the waiting list and who require sums ranging from £1,000 to £20,000. That gives some idea of the extent of the housing problem in my constituency. By terminating the mandatory grants system, the Government have caused a tremor throughout my constituency which is equal to that felt in Burslem when there was an earthquake registering 2.7 on the Richter scale. We are facing a housing crisis, and the removal of mandatory grants will condemn many of my constituents to living in damp and in squalor—the sort of housing that should have vanished with the 19th century.

For the legislation to deal effectively with housing problems in my constituency, it should include several important provisions. I refer to the situation facing about 33 so-called "ineligible owners" who live on the Galleys Bank estate in Kidsgrove in my constituency. Those people purchased properties, which they later discovered were built using the Schindler construction method, after the cut-off date of 26 April 1984. They did not know then that the properties were defective under housing defects legislation.

I have raised the issue with the Government. It is outrageous that 33 owner-occupiers are unable to find a solution to their problem. It is not simply a matter of liability, as the Minister suggested earlier. The Government must recognise that those people could not have known that their homes were defective. It will not do to say that the matter can be dealt with under the present system of discretionary housing grants as the properties require 90 to 100 per cent. rebuilding grants. When we reach the later stages in our consideration of the Bill, I shall ask the Minister to discuss the matter with Newcastle borough council in order to find a solution to that constituency problem.

As we approach the millennium, we desperately need a housing strategy. Local authorities throughout the country, including the two that I represent—Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle—manage to fulfil their housing responsibilities. The village of Bradeley in my constituency demonstrates how local authorities can be innovative and meet housing needs, but to do that they need more than legislation: sufficient funds need to be made available. Quite simply, the Government have not done that.

I believe that the challenge facing the current Government in respect of this legislation, the next Government—which will certainly be a Labour Government—and local authorities throughout the country is to plan for the millennium and make sure that we have decent housing that can be handed down the generations to our children and grandchildren.

8.10 pm

Mr. Anthony Coombs (Wyre Forest): In giving a general but not unequivocal welcome to the Bill, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister for Construction, Planning and Energy Efficiency on his hard work, particularly with the building industry, and his almost unrivalled grasp of the issues involved. It is a shame that he is not in his place—he has probably gone to dinner—nevertheless it should be recognised that he has done a wonderful job.

I should first declare an interest. I am proud to have been in the housebuilding industry for the past 20 years and I understand some of the problems that have been mentioned, particularly in respect of part II of the Bill. I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) that I have always used an architect. Generally speaking, the architectural profession produces excellent work.

It would be remiss of me to mention some aspects of the Bill without referring to the extraordinary remarks by the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn). He said that Conservative Members tended to laugh at what he had to say. I certainly did not laugh; I found his words absolutely chilling. I am glad that he said them, however, as I suspect that they reflect the views of a large proportion of Labour Members.

Mr. Keith Vaz (Leicester, East): *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Coombs: The hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) shakes his head, possibly signifying yet another split within the Labour party in this as in other areas of policy.

The right hon. Member for Chesterfield spoke in Castro-esque terms about the nationalisation or common ownership of land, and denigrated people's sincere attempts to own their own homes just because they might have to raise the money by taking on a mortgage. When the right hon. Gentleman was Viscount Stansgate, he might not have had to do that, but the vast majority of the rest of the world does. His comments might have been considered a slap in the face by people who aspire to home ownership in that way.

In that context, the capitalist society, as the right hon. Gentleman put it, has done rather a good job in terms of the condition of housing stock in Britain. As we have heard, in the past five years the proportion of dwellings regarded as unfit has fallen by about 10 per cent. to 1 million. The figure is still too high. We also heard that one third of those dwellings could be put right at a cost of less than £500 and that half were unfit in only one respect.

Throughout the building industry and in my constituency, the interaction of the private and public sector, technological advances and improved building regulations over the past few years have resulted in significant improvements in the general standard of our housing. To give just one example, the latest household survey, which relates to the period between 1979 and 1991, shows that when Labour was last in government, only 43 per cent. of pensioners—who are not regarded as a high wealth sector in society—had central heating in their homes; something that most people regard as pretty basic. The present figure is well over 75 per cent. That demonstrates an improvement in the housing conditions of a large proportion of people in Britain.

Part I of the Bill deals with housing renovation grants and grant regimes generally. The Government are absolutely right to put those matters on a discretionary, not a mandatory, basis, for the simple reason that councils should be able to decide their priorities in those matters. Their objection to a discretionary scheme sits ill with Labour Members who are always extolling the virtues of

giving local councils more power to object. As Lord Williams of Elvel said in the House of Lords on 20 February 1996:

"Worse still, practice on how to apply the discretionary system will vary from local authority to local authority."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 February 1996; Vol. 569, c. 984.]

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Geoffrey Lofthouse): Order. The hon. Gentleman must not quote speeches made in the House of Lords, except by Ministers.

Mr. Coombs: I stand admonished, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The fact that he said that that would be so demonstrates one of the strengths of the system, which until now has been reactive rather than proactive and has led to a pepper pot or static approach. The Bill will allow local authorities to target resources to ensure that renovation grants are properly monitored. In too many cases, they are not, and that leads to a waste of resources.

The proposed change would affect certain properties, particularly those owned by private landlords, who are not covered by the housing renovation grant scheme. Only 4 per cent. of approvals for renovation grants relate to properties owned by private landlords although they preside over one third of unfit buildings. It would allow local councils—if they wished, and I hope they do, irrespective of their political colour—to work with private landlords to improve the condition of their housing stock. Obviously, that will depend on the commitment of an individual council to its task and its willingness to work with private landlords.

It is important to avoid a feeling of injustice and discrimination—despite the neighbourhood renewal assessments—among those who will no longer receive housing renovation grants to which they feel automatically entitled. It is even more important that local councils who will be working on a strategic basis ensure that local communities have a sense of ownership in respect of improvements to the area.

When I represented Moseley on Birmingham city council, I worked closely with the Balsall Heath residents action group as Balsall Heath was an inner-city part of my ward. One of that group's continual gripes about the council in those days—irrespective of political control—was that improvements were being carried out despite them and over their heads. They had no feeling of ownership so they did not consider any improvements to be of lasting value.

Sadly, the housing renovation grant scheme—irrespective of the fact that it will be discretionary—continues to overlay the existing means test, which is complicated and which many of my thrifty constituents, who have maintained a certain level of income as a result of their savings, consider to be discriminatory. We have heard that there were £357 million worth of applications for housing renovation when £250 million was available. There will always be a scarcity of resources, irrespective of which party is in government at Westminster.

It is important that resources are used sensibly, not wasted, and to engage the efforts of the private sector through housing improvement trusts, venture capital trusts and so on, to add to available resources. Tax relief for essential improvements, even though it may exceed the £30,000 limit, is something that the Treasury should examine. There is an argument for allowing capital receipts to be targeted for the purpose in some councils—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."]—subject to the councils being able to prove via the Audit Commission or the Department of the Environment that their overall financial position is such that the use of capital receipts would not be irresponsible.

I welcome the home repairs grant, which replaces the minor works assistance grants—particularly in respect of mobile home owners. There is an enormous number of caravan and mobile home owners in my constituency—the highest in the United Kingdom. Too often, they have missed out on grants for minor improvements that would make a significant difference to their properties. The scheme marks a significant advance.

We must attribute part II to not only my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State but Sir Michael Latham and his team. I am always slightly suspicious—it may just be bloody-mindedness on my part—when there is a consensus across the House in favour of one particular action, particularly when it involves greater Government interference in an industry as large as construction, which has a turnover of £50 billion and employs 5 million people. However, I accept that Sir Michael was right in identifying significant improvements that could be made to the industry. The estimate of 30 per cent. overcosting is probably not unrealistic, to the extent that the industry is too often confrontational—although I have never found it particularly so in my 25 years of dealing with contractors and sub-contractors.

Training standards are generally poor. Despite the existence—and here is a lesson for us all—of the Construction Industry Training Board, there is a lack of qualifications in what is a fragmented industry, and it is significantly undercapitalised in many cases—particularly in respect of smaller companies. I support the Bill's proposals to outlaw "pay when paid" contracts.

A company in my constituency, Burke Brothers, laid electrical cable along the M5 and M4. That firm, which employed about 90 people, worked with Tilbury Douglas. I do not suggest that that company, which was contracted by the Highways Agency, was at all to blame. As there was no easy way of arbitrating on the agency's refusal to pay Tilbury Douglas because the standard of work was not adequate, and because Tilbury Douglas operated a "pay when paid" contract with Burke Brothers, that firm ran into enormous financial difficulties. As a result, its 90 former employees work elsewhere or not at all. "Pay when paid" contracts are unrealistic and anachronistic, and they should be abolished.

I agree that the new engineering contract ought to be the industry standard, but I have some reservations about the circumstances under which it might be replaced and what might replace it, under the scheme for construction contracts. I am not sure who would activate the move to the mandatory, Government-led contract. Who would decide that a particular contract was not appropriate in terms of its payments and other provisions, and when? I see the potential, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Dover), for considerable delay unless such questions are clearly answered by the Committee and the Bill.

A much clearer definition of construction operations is needed. We heard the plea made on behalf of the process industries. I believe that more and more construction will

[Mr. Coombs]

be off-site, by prefabrication. Provision for that development needs to be made in the contractual conditions.

Although I welcome adjudication, we must ensure that it is not over used by people who are trying to seek an unjustified advantage in the contract. I would like adjudication to be continually used throughout a contract, but with recourse to the courts available at the end of the contract if either party felt aggrieved in respect of overpayment or contract length.

The power exercised by different commercial interests—particularly by large contractors over small firms—will remain in evidence, irrespective of the letter of contracts. Small contractors will still want more business from larger companies, so will be unwilling to rock the boat. Any contract should take cognisance of that.

One reason for confrontation in the building industry in recent years is the narrow profit margins resulting from the state of trade. When there is more meat, companies are prepared to share it. Firms too often sign up to a contract on which they will notionally make a loss at a particular price, hoping to negotiate a profit from the extras that come along during the contract's life. That practice is due to the state of trade, and I do not see how it can be avoided. When trade picks up, hopefully such practices will gradually disappear—as in the past.

I cannot understand why clause 105 prevents a party to the contract who wishes to live in the property that is to be constructed from taking advantage of the new terms—particularly since people live in their own houses and, as a result, enter into contracts that are of significantly greater value than do people who work on a business basis. They obviously feel the results and therefore the need for arbitration in a far more intimate and intense way. I am not convinced that private householders should—subject possibly to a minimum £20,000 contract value—be excluded from the Bill's provisions. I hope that the Government will give some thought to that aspect.

The good in the Bill significantly outweighs those matters about which I have reservations—particularly part II. I ask only that any scheme that the Government introduce through regulations rather than primary legislation is not so bureaucratic as to increase costs and delays in the construction industry, which would be against the interests of everybody—including those people who are working so constructively with Sir Michael Latham.

8.28 pm

Mr. William O'Brien (Normanton): The Bill covers many issues, and we could spend a long time trying to consider them all, but I want to refer to the housing issues that arise out of it, because I consider housing to be the greatest social problem in the country. I know that we have unemployment benefit, community care, health care and education, but if we had proper and significant housing provision, many other social problems would be eased.

I want, therefore, to impress on the House the need to introduce a comprehensive housing strategy to resolve the problems that I, as a constituency Member of Parliament, encounter. I receive more correspondence and other representations on housing issues than on any other subject. I know that unemployment is high on the agenda of the Labour party, but I must tell the Minister, the Conservative Government and my colleagues that we must place housing high on our agenda because of the social consequences of the lack of a housing strategy.

The Bill is designed to end grant assistance for low-income owners and landlords to bring their property up to a minimum standard of repair and to replace it with grants given at the discretion of the local authority. That is not a welcome move, because proper resources should be given to local authorities if they are to have responsibility for distributing grants.

The Bill would remove the basic human right to a home that is fit to live in. The current system gives a statutory right to cash help to bring property up to a minimum standard, subject to a means test. It ensures that owner-occupiers and tenants who are trapped in housing that is officially unfit to live in and who are unable to afford its repair are eligible for Government grant. A significant number of people find it difficult to provide the resources to bring their homes up to a proper quality.

It is now the Government's policy that elderly people should remain in their homes longer. The removal of the right to a Government grant—less than five years after its introduction—will extinguish any hope of help or support in many vulnerable people who live in homes that are in need of urgent repair. One in six—or 3.5 million—properties require urgent repairs costing more than £1,000.

The Bill refers to deferred action. That is an option that will legitimise doing nothing when a house is found to fail minimum standards. Unfitness will be officially sanctioned and many properties will suffer from blight while awaiting action, which will be put off. At the resource levels currently planned, many local authorities will be unable to use the new grant more flexibly, as cash will be spread too thinly to do much more than deal with the worst problems and meet obligations to pay grants to disabled people. We will witness a patch-and-mend system, which I consider totally unacceptable.

We have a serious reservation about the way in which legislation has been implemented—in particular, the lack of transparency in the allocation processes, including the competitive nature of the process, the role of the Government offices in the regions and the extent to which need is taken into account. We also have reservations about the fact that the number of areas able to access regeneration resources has been extended, while resources have been reduced.

Age Concern has told the Government that it is

"disappointed that Government proposals to extend Part M of the building regulations to take account of the access requirements of disabled people . . . are not included in the bill."

The Minister has said that the Government are considering that issue, but unless it is addressed, greater problems will occur.

Age Concern also reports, in the briefing material that every hon. Member has received, that 71 per cent. of disabled facility grants were given to applicants aged 60 or over. That is the area at which grants should be targeted, but without the proper resources it will be more difficult to help people over 60.

The National Home Improvement Council has also presented a report, arising out of its house condition survey, that shows that about 1.5 million dwellings are

unfit for habitation and that a further 1.1 million, while not unfit, require substantial repair. We have evidence, therefore, of a significant problem in housing repair, and the reduction in grants will not help people who are in need of assistance.

Wakefield housing department reports a problem because a range of other grants and provisions aimed at helping people to improve and maintain the standard of their homes will also be affected by the Bill. The chairman of the housing committee makes it clear that, if the Bill is passed, the effect will be worrying for that housing authority.

Contrary to what the Minister said in his opening remarks about canvassing local authorities and receiving their support in principle for the Bill, my local authority has made it clear on more than one occasion that, without the proper resources and assistance from the Government to make grants, there will be a deterioration in the quality of housing stock throughout the Wakefield metropolitan district area. The annual capital allocation for 1996-97 that has been set in my area is half of what the authority will require if it is to meet the demand for housing grants and provide the help that is needed.

The glass industry has said that it could help with renovations and housing grants. In my area, which is part of the Yorkshire and Humberside area, there has been a substantial reduction in the number of grants made available. Without some additional provisions in the Bill, greater problems will arise. That is clear from the representations that I have received—as, I am sure, have other Members of Parliament—from constituents.

The Bill and the Housing Bill will do nothing to help the social problem of housing. Because of the lack of support from the Government on housing provision and the quality of housing, I shall join my colleagues in opposing the Bill tonight. I hope that, in Committee, the Government will consider carefully the amendments that we will table, because they would help to enhance the quality of housing through the grants system. I also hope that we will be given some assurances that people will not suffer because of the deterioration in provision that is outlined in the Bill.

8.39 pm

Sir Anthony Durant (Reading, West): The hon. Member for Newham, North–West (Mr. Banks) has signalled to me requesting that I speak for only five minutes. I shall do my best.

I am chairman of the all-party group on the construction industry, so I feel that I should make a few comments. I am also a personal friend of Sir Michael Latham. He and I have been involved in politics for a long time. He did an outstanding job on his report and it is well worth all hon. Members' reading it.

The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) made a fatuous and silly speech. It was wide of the Bill and no more than the usual soundbite stuff that we have come to expect from him.

However, the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) made an outstanding and extraordinary speech. He wants to nationalise the land. That has been attempted. I was a member of the Committee that considered the Community Land Act 1975, night after night, for about a month. The Bill was enacted and 80 acres were nationalised at a cost of £150 million. The measure was then dropped. The right hon. Gentleman did not mention the Labour party's experience in nationalising the land.

The Institution of Civil Engineers is concerned about contracting. It asked, and I in turn ask my hon. Friend the Minister, about the date of implementation of the Bill. The institution suggests that it should be some six months after Royal Assent. It wants time to amend its standard contracts in line with the Bill. It is also concerned about existing contracts, which it feels should stand. In addition, it would like clarification of some kind of outline of the scheme. I believe that that will come in the form of a statutory instrument. It would like to see that as soon as possible.

The Bill does not deal with professional negligence, which is another concern of the industry. I understand that that matter is being considered separately.

The institution feels that adjudication is good for obtaining a quick decision on a dispute during construction so that work can continue, but it is concerned that adjudication is being confused with arbitration. The decision resulting from adjudication should be binding only until completion; complex legal arguments should be dealt with later. That is in the Bill, and I merely emphasise it.

The institution is also concerned about the withholding of payments and the suspending of performance—walking off site. It suggests that a contractor intending to withhold payments should give valid reasons for so doing. It proposes an extra clause, which on careful study does seem reasonable, under which, if a contractor sought an adjudication on whether effective notice of withholding payment had been given, the right of a sub-contractor to walk off site could not be exercised on withholding payment.

Those are some of the worries of the Institution of Civil Engineers of which my hon. Friend the Minister is probably well aware, but I simply wanted to put them on the record.

There are matters in the Latham report which I hoped would be in the Bill. Its recommendation on insolvency is not in the Bill. That is a great worry to the industry, and I hope that it will be considered later. There is also the matter of who activates the provisions of the scheme, which has been raised in an intervention. Disputes could arise over whether the scheme has been activated. That point needs clarification.

Part I has been unjustly slammed by the Opposition. No credit has been given for the fact that facilities for disabled people will be given grants. Such facilities are important.

Mrs. Maddock: I did recognise that fact in my speech.

Sir Anthony Durant: I apologise. The hon. Lady must have done so during the short time I was out of the Chamber getting some nourishment. I saw her doing the same just after me. I accept that. The grants for facilities for disabled people are generous.

I also welcome the grants for clearance, which are important in respect of large estates where clearance is necessary if new, smart estates are to be built. The Bill will assist councils in dealing with grants for clearance.

[Sir Anthony Durant]

Those are the few general points that I wished to make. I hope that I have not been too long for the hon. Member for Newham, North-West. I support the Bill and shall vote for it tonight.

8.44 pm

Mr. George Stevenson (Stoke–on–Trent, South): We have heard much from Conservative Members about such important matters as the organisation of the architecture profession, but I want to concentrate on part I and the scandal with regard to renovation grants.

Having created the crisis of unfit houses and the lack of resources to meet that scandalous situation, the Government intend to remove the mandatory right to an improvement grant for houses that are statutorily unfit and, effectively, to walk away from the problem.

Like every other hon. Member, I was prepared to give the Minister the benefit of the doubt and listen to what he had to say, but his arguments fell into a significant pit of disrepute when he tried to convince the House that the Government's intention was to pass responsibility to local authorities. The Minister was trying to convince us that the Government support local authorities and that they think that local authorities do a good job. The Government have spent 17 years systematically undermining local authorities, yet the Minister has the temerity to suggest that the Government's motivation here is their love for local authorities and their belief that all local authorities are so competent that they will do a better job than the Government. It was at that point that the Minister's argument fell to pieces.

As we approach the 21st century, the removal of that right to grant will condemn millions of people to live in houses that are unfit for habitation. Hon. Members must reflect on that. After 17 years of Tory rule, that is the prospect that millions of people face. There are hundreds of such people in Stoke-on-Trent, many of them in my constituency.

I want to give the House some idea, in the short time available, of how serious the situation is, using the example of Stoke-on-Trent, which is by no means unusual. Hundreds of authorities face the same problem. I give the following information for Conservative Members' delectation.

The latest information from Stoke-on-Trent shows that 419 owner-occupiers are waiting for a mandatory renovation grant. Sixty-one involve landlords on whom notices have been served, 74 are for mandatory disabled facility grants and 57 are for assistance for minor works. In the case of 51 mandatory renovation grants to landlords where notices have been served, and in the case of 167 mandatory disabled facility grants, application forms have been issued.

As a result of preliminary investigations by the local authority, it is estimated that some 780 owner-occupiers are in unfit properties where initial property appraisal has shown that they meet all the criteria for a mandatory grant. I could give more statistics, but I shall not bore the House—particularly Conservative Members, who are not very interested.

If we tot up the figures, we see that, in Stoke-on-Trent alone, 1,600 properties would qualify for grant, about 800 of which would qualify for a mandatory grant, yet they have no chance of getting one.

What do the Government do in the light of that disgraceful situation, which affects not only Stoke-on-Trent, but authorities countrywide? They walk away from it. They pick up their ball and walk away. The Minister is not fooling anyone when he tells us that that is because the Government have great faith in local authorities. We all know that the reason for the Bill is that the Government have been stung by the justified criticism of the chaos that they have created in this area of housing. When the Bill becomes law they want to be able to say, "It has nowt to do with us; local authorities are to blame." That is the real motivation behind the Bill. If the present Government are still in power—which I doubt—Ministers may well reply to our questions by saying, "Don't blame us; blame local authorities."

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley) mentioned the Under-Secretary of State's visit to Stoke-on-Trent following our representations. I, too, thank the Under-Secretary of State for taking the time and trouble to go and see for himself what is happening. Our arguments were clear; the hon. Gentleman listened, he saw, and his heart melted slightly. We thought that it had, anyway, and we thought that there would be a little more money to spend on that vital area—£300,000 in supplementary credit, in fact.

This is where I depart slightly from what was said by my hon. Friend. Supplementary credit approval does not mean more money from the Government; it means that the council has authority to borrow, and that local taxpayers must pay. As I have said, I thank the Minister for his interest, for his visit, and for taking part in discussions with us, but the fact remains that, having recognised the problem, he said that no more Government money was available—"but you can borrow a bit more if you like, and council tax payers can pay."

What sort of approach is that, in view of the statistics that I gave relating to the authority represented by my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent, North, for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) and me? Many properties will continue to be unfit for human habitation, and will deteriorate. Local authorities cannot meet their legal obligations—and that is not accidental, but a direct result of Government policy. As we enter the latter part of the 20th century, millions of people throughout the country are finding themselves trapped in housing that is unfit for human habitation, and neither the Bill nor Ministers' speeches can give them any hope. That is the legacy of 17 years of Tory Britain; the sooner it is changed, the better.

8.51 pm

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): As we are short of time and several of my hon. Friends wish to speak, and because it is of utmost importance to my constituency, I shall concentrate on the part of the Bill that deals with grants. I shall, however, refer briefly to part II, and the measures that arise from the Latham report. Having known Michael Latham, and having studied the report when it was published, I believed that action was necessary, and I am glad that the Bill provides for action. I recognise, however, that many of the issues involved would best be debated in Committee.

I agree with some hon. Members who have spoken today, and with bodies such as Age Concern, that the Government have merely paid lip service to the

importance of the home energy efficiency scheme by including measures in the Bill. The Chancellor of the Exchequer cut more than £30 million from the programme in last year's Budget. That is not consistent; it is nonsense.

Some 250,186 dwellings in the north-west are unfit for habitation. It is a serious problem—certainly in my constituency, where much of the housing stock is pre-1918 and in need of major renovation. Let us consider what the Government have done for home improvement. In 1983, there was a bonanza before the general election when, as hon. Members will recall, councils were given unlimited resources to provide grants to improve older housing stock. I believed at the time that that was a deliberate attempt to influence the outcome of the election, and to a large extent my suspicions proved correct. Immediately after the election, there was a clampdown on the available funds.

From that time on, the Government have consistently attacked home improvement and modernisation. In the 1988 Budget, they stopped tax relief on mortgages and loans; that came into effect on 6 April. In the 1984 Budget, they introduced VAT on home improvement work; that came into effect on 1 June 1984. Then there was the means test for grant introduced in 1990 as a result of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. In ending mandatory grants the Government are driving another nail into the coffin, preventing the improvement of older housing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson) said that he thought that, when a Minister visited his constituency and saw the problem, his heart melted a little. Housing Minister after housing Minister has been to Burnley, but I have not seen one respond in a way that would do a single thing to deal with the problem. They have all uttered nice words of concern, but not a penny has been spent. When Ian Gow was a housing Minister he visited Burnley, and I must say in all fairness that he did not only go to the houses that we had arranged for him to go to; he stopped the car here, there and everywhere, and jumped out to look at houses for himself. When he returned to London, however, he wrote a nice letter saying that he recognised the problem but that no more cash was available at that time.

Another former housing Minister, the right hon. Member for Ealing, Acton (Sir G. Young), visited Burnley twice. I have lobbied him on behalf of the north-west, including Wigan; I have lobbied him with groups representing Merseyside, Greater Manchester, Lancashire and Cheshire—with councillors, council officers and Members of Parliament. At the time—some four years ago—the right hon. Gentleman recognised the difficulties involved in a service that is demand-led. The answer, however, is not to clamp down on grants and do away with them, as the Government are doing; that merely directs resources in a slightly different direction.

All the north-east Lancashire authorities came down to meet the right hon. Member for Acton. He said then that north-east Lancashire, and Burnley in particular, had a peculiar cocktail of problems: low incomes, a high proportion of home ownership and pre-1918 properties and low values, even after improvement. Let me tell the Minister who will wind up the debate that we still have exactly that problem, and that the Bill does nothing to deal with it.

How will councils cope under the new arrangements that will do away with the mandatory right to ask for a grant? On many occasions, former Ministers refused to acknowledge that councils were having to exercise rationing because they were unable to meet their statutory requirement to provide mandatory grants due to lack of cash. How does the Under-Secretary think that councils with major problems in their areas will be able to determine their priorities? I look at Burnley and wonder whether the priority will be Daneshouse, Stoneyholme or Burnley Wood. I am glad that I am not on the council and have to take such difficult decisions. There are just not enough resources to deal with the problems.

I hope that there will be flexibility in the use of the three-year qualification. If no one will move into the odd old terraced house in Burnley that has not been improved, and the property becomes empty because people have few resources and cannot do it up because of the grants arrangement, the house will become derelict and destroy the whole terrace. The Minister referred to pepper-potting, which I recognise can cause difficulties and problems. The Under-Secretary must recognise, however, that in old industrial towns, where a terrace can be as long as the road, the entire terrace can be destroyed if individual houses are not improved or maintained and become empty and derelict. Where there are few resources and low-value properties, it is very difficult to deal with the problem.

To say that there is an ability to defer grants for disabled facilities for a year is unacceptable. If a disabled person is found to be eligible and in need of a grant to provide facilities to overcome their disability, they should receive it straight away. Councils such as my local authority have problems because they have always virtually run out of resources after the first two or three months of the year and can deal only with priorities for the rest of the year. There are many other instances in which they should be able to give grants, but cannot, and people suffer as a result. The Government must recognise those major problems in places such as Burnley and north-east Lancashire and realise that the only way in which to solve them is to make more resources available to address the needs of the older housing stock.

9 pm

Mr. Ian Pearson (Dudley, West): The Bill is lengthy but disappointing. Some of its proposals are welcome, especially those that implement certain recommendations of the Latham report, on which, regrettably, time will not allow me to comment. Ultimately, however, the Bill is a failure because it does nothing to tackle the fundamental problem of inadequate investment in new housing and in the regeneration and renovation of older sub-standard housing. The dismantling of the mandatory renovation grant system is simply a back-door way to cut costs. It will mean that more owner-occupiers and tenants will have to live in housing misery for longer—and that some will have to face the fact that they might never see their housing conditions improved in their lifetimes.

In Dudley, the local authority has 500 outstanding housing grant applications, which total about £4.25 million, yet it has seen its specified capital grant almost chopped in half since the regime was introduced, from £2.75 million in 1991-92 to less than £1.5 million this year. It is estimated that people in the queue will have to wait at least three years before their applications are

[Mr. Ian Pearson]

sorted out—notwithstanding the growing queues for disabled facilities due to financial restrictions, which are an all too depressing feature in my local area.

What is more, that is only the tip of the iceberg. A housing stock condition survey conducted last year in Dudley showed that there were 5,000 unfit dwellings. Across all sectors, about £300 million is needed to bring the houses up to a basic standard of habitation. Yet at the same time, the housing investment programme allocation grant to Dudley borough this year was only £12 million. At that rate of progress, it will take 25 years to deal with the current problems, let alone with what might happen in future. The Bill will also do nothing to solve the problems of 11,000 people in Dudley who are on the housing waiting list.

Part IV of the Bill includes a measure to extend the Secretary of State's powers to provide financial assistance, principally through providing a single legislative basis for the single regeneration budget. I see the sense of a single legislative basis for the SRB, but I am very disappointed that the business start-up scheme is still one of the programmes in the SRB pot. It is wrong that in some parts of the country one can start a business if one wants but in others one cannot. There needs to be a national scheme to help people who are taking their first entrepreneurial step, yet it is just not available.

As someone who is involved in advising a number of local authorities and training and enterprise councils on preparing bids for the first round of SRB funds and advising Government offices on assessing bids, I must admit that the SRB process has produced some significant benefits. It has made possible a much-needed sharpening up of some local authorities and training and enterprise councils, which the city challenge process also helped to produce. It has enabled them to take a more strategic approach to urban regeneration and to act in partnership, which is now becoming an established feature of activity in urban regeneration.

It is tough to recognise that, although an area may suffer from incredible deprivation, its funding applications need to be rejected because the local authority and its partners are not up to the job. However, if that is the case and better value for money can be had elsewhere, so be it; it has to be done. A balance needs to be struck between the needs of the area and the ability of partners to deliver.

There are a number of practical difficulties with the way in which the SRB regime works in practice. A project to install inside toilets and replace rotten windows to make houses fit for habitation is extremely important to those living in conditions of disrepair, such as those in parts of my constituency, but it is not a sexy SRB bid. The SRB criterion of partnership skews bids towards those projects which can demonstrate partnership.

Many housing programmes cannot demonstrate partnership, so it is not surprising that housing schemes in my patch have done badly as a result of the change from estate action to SRB. In 1994, £3.78 million was allocated to housing schemes, but this year only £430,000 has been allocated. That reflects a judgment of what can be got through the Government office as a successful SRB bid as much as it reflects Government cuts in funding and the views of local partners on what priorities should be set.

Similar problems exist with private sector leverage. It is a laudable principle and, while I accept that it should be a feature of the SRB bidding process, bids that rely entirely on those criteria and have no flexibility are fundamentally flawed.

Part V of the Bill enables the Secretary of State to set up one or more residuary bodies to receive any property, rights or liabilities from urban development corporations and other bodies. The Department of the Environment memorandum on the Bill dated 14 February provided a justification for the proposal. It said:

"it makes sense to create a single body to deal with all the remaining issues, rather than to perpetuate the life of each corporation until its functions have been completed. The alternative would be to hand the residuary functions to the Secretary of State to be dealt with by the appropriate regional Government Office. Not only might this, in some cases, result in wasteful duplication of effort, it would also require the application of skills not normally available in GOs unless they were to engage consultants."

I must admit to surprise at that, because my experience of the west midlands residuary body and others is that they were not reticent in buying in skills from consultants. I should add that, if Government offices do not have the skills to handle the functions of urban development corporations, they should acquire them. They, after all, have to decide on urban regeneration bids and they ought to become strategic partners in urban and regional regeneration, not pure bag carriers for the Government.

If the Government do not want to go down the Government office route, an alternative is to consider using English Partnerships as a vehicle for bids. However, the Government do not seem to be doing so. While the memorandum talks about creating a single body to deal with all the remaining issues, I received this reply from the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Sir P. Beresford), to a question about what would happen to the financial liabilities incurred by the urban development corporations:

"negotiations with potential successor bodies are still taking place."—[*Official Report*, 23 April 1996; Vol. 276, c. *64*.]

On 14 February the Government said that a single body makes sense, but on 23 April they said that they were in negotiation with potential successor bodies. Which is right? We badly need an explanation.

The Bill will do nothing for the many hundreds of my constituents who live in housing misery. On that basis, while I welcome its positive measures for the construction industry, it must be opposed.

9.9 pm

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate, because housing is a big issue in north-east Lancashire. Pendle lies alongside the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) and shares common characteristics with it.

I listened carefully to the Minister's opening remarks. He convinced me, as if I needed any convincing, that this is another fraudulent Bill from a fraudulent Government. He said that it would create flexibility and give help where it is most needed. Some 15,000 properties in my borough—45 per cent. of the stock—need renovation. What is the point of targeting such a vast problem? What can be done when so much of the stock needs renovation? It requires not flexibility but more cash and resources to tackle the problem.

The Minister went on to say—this is one of those comforting Tory nostrums with which people find it difficult to disagree—that home owners are responsible for their own homes. No one would disagree with that, but there are compelling public policy considerations that mean that the state has a role to play in housing provision. Of course it is right that home owners are responsible for their own homes but what happens when they are impoverished—when they are on low wages or unemployed—and cannot afford to do up their homes? That is the position in north-east Lancashire. Huge deprivation is caused by bad housing, low wages and unemployment. People cannot find the money to do up their houses.

Poor housing means poor health. In my constituency, 30 per cent. of households have a member suffering from a limiting long-term illness. That compares with a national average of 18 per cent. and is another compelling reason for tackling the decrepit housing stock. The hon. Member for Christchurch (Mrs. Maddock) reminded us of what the Age Concern document said:

"The harmful effects of poor housing on health are well recorded. Dampness can lead to bronchial and respiratory illnesses; cold housing to hypothermia and increased susceptibility to illnesses; unsafe houses can lead to accident and deaths".

How true that is.

There is also a burden on the health service. The hon. Member for Christchurch mentioned the £800 million that it costs the NHS to remedy conditions that should be tackled at source by dealing with clapped-out houses that should have been renovated years ago. The Minister said that councils, as opposed to the local authority associations, welcome the move from mandatory to discretionary grants. Where is the evidence for that? It another ministerial assertion plucked from the air. Perhaps he was talking only of Conservative councils, of which I think there are about 11.

I seem to be giving you a headache, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This is an important issue and I want to make sure that the Minister hears what I am saying. I can modulate my voice now that I have the Minister's attention. Mandatory grants were described by the *Lancashire Evening Telegraph* in the year of my election to the House as a "sick joke". The newspaper, which has a high readership in the area, said that thousands of people with the legal right to mandatory grants do not get them because they are, in effect, rationed. That was the point I made to the Minister earlier.

That is something that crops up year after year in the housing strategy documents published by my local authority. The 1995 document stated that applications

"are processed at a rate determined by the level of funds available."

That is not a solution. They were not mandatory grants, but arbitrary grants yet those grants were needed.

North-east Lancashire has the oldest housing stock in the north-west and perhaps the oldest in the country; it is totally clapped out. People should not be living in many of the houses. In my constituency, 20,000 houses were built before 1919, which is 57 per cent. of all dwellings, 65 per cent. of the houses are in band A, which is the lowest council tax band, 18,000 homes were built before the turn of the century and 15,000 are assessed as in need of renovation. We are talking about 15,000 families living in houses that need to be renovated. Also, 2,150 additional homes failed to meet current fitness standards. The local authority estimates that the cost of improving stock, bringing it up to standard and making it fit for human habitation would be £14 million. There is no getting away from the fact—

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman (Lancaster) *rose*—

Mr. Prentice: I think that I can anticipate what the hon. Lady is about to say, but I will give way to her even though she has only just walked into the Chamber.

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman: Oh, no she has not—she has been sitting over there.

May I point out to the hon. Gentleman that my constituency has a very elderly housing stock? Many houses and schools are more than 300 years old, but, because we have had a Conservative city council for most of the time, we have steadily got on with renovating those houses. Houses that were worth £200 when I first became the Member of Parliament were given council grants to be renovated. On St. George's quay, there are now some beautiful houses, which will last another century. That is because the local authority did its task over the years. It did not say, "Woe is me", and leave it to the next generation. We got on with the job when it came.

Mr. Prentice: Lancaster is now Labour-controlled, and perhaps I am looking at the reason for that change of control. There is no comparison between Lancaster and north-east Lancashire.

We need cash to make a serious attack on housing repairs, dilapidation and decay. I mentioned that 15,000 houses were in need of renovation and that an additional 2,150 were unfit for human habitation. How many mandatory grants did my local authority award in 1995? Only 99 and 12 discretionary grants. In 1995-96, it awarded 122 mandatory grants and 12 discretionary grants. This year, in the housing investment programme, which looks forward to 1996-97—the current year—the number of mandatory grants will plummet to 70 from 122 and the number of discretionary grants to 12. That cannot even begin to make a dent in the problem.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley) said, the Minister is being completely disingenuous in saying that local authorities will be given responsibility and that the discretion that the Bill offers them will magically provide a remedy that was not there before. The harsh truth is that local authorities have been starved of cash and have not been able to use their capital receipts to do up the housing stock and we are paying the price for that.

I started by saying that the Bill is totally fraudulent. I suspect that no one in my constituency would disagree with that assessment.

9.18 pm

Mr. Tony Banks (Newham, North-West): This is a comprehensive Bill, and I should like to touch on a couple of its provisions.

I do not think that the removal of mandatory grants will make the situation any better. We currently cannot keep up with demand, and there is no way of attempting seriously to deal with the problem by saying that demand has been unrealistic and that we will get rid of mandatory grants.

[Mr. Tony Banks]

We have an enormous range of problems, particularly in London. In my area of Newham, housing is undoubtedly our most severe social problem. Most of the case load at my advice surgery in Stratford is about housing, and much of it is about private sector housing. Contrary to popular belief, most of the properties—or a majority of them in my constituency, in the north of the borough—are in the private sector. Much of that housing is seriously dilapidated, and I think that this Bill will make the situation worse.

We have a problem in London. In 1991, 21 per cent. of private sector stock was designated unfit, yet public expenditure on renovation grants is currently less than a third of the 1983 level in real terms. There are 175,000 private sector dwellings in London that are statutorily unfit, many of which will be inhabited by elderly owner-occupiers. Previously all owners on low incomes would have qualified for grants, but now only a few will be eligible. I do not understand how the Minister can possibly say that this Bill will improve housing in the east end or in London generally.

As I understand clause 139, it gives enormous powers to Ministers without any positive vote of the House of Commons. If we are to consider transferring assets to other statutory bodies, particularly to residuary bodies, we must realise that the track record of residuary bodies is not good—again, that is particularly so in London. The process involves taking public property and handing it over to unaccountable, hand-picked men, and to the occasional woman, to dispose of as they see fit—without any proper accountability or control.

The classic example of residuary bodies in London was, of course, the London residuary body, which was set up under the chairmanship of Sir Godfrey Taylor, a former Tory leader of Croydon council. The Government have always been very wise and astute in picking a Tory stooge to do their dirty work for them. That residuary body was responsible for disposing of a great many public assets.

Residuary bodies simply do not have the degree of public accountability that elected councils or elected bodies have, and we must complain about that. The public do not have access to the meetings at which public assets are disposed of, and they are not able to read the minutes of those meetings. Deals were done behind closed doors. When we tried to ask questions about the activities of residuary bodies, we were told that that is a matter for the residuary body, or that it is a matter of commercial confidentiality. That money and those assets belong to the public. In many ways, they are being given away and flogged off at knockdown prices, and that is totally unacceptable.

Who are the people appointed to residuary bodies? They are mates of Ministers and old, clapped-out Tory councillors—of whom there are now many, given what has been happening to the Tories in recent years. Those people get stuck on residuary bodies and pull down very substantial fees for turning up for the odd day, and no doubt a good lunch afterwards. Those practices bring the whole system into disrepute.

The classic example was the London residuary body, which is the type of body that we are talking about in the Bill. The House should be very wary of handing over anything to such a body. Hon. Members should consider the disposal of county hall. It was sold to Shirayama Shokusan, a shadowy Japanese company that we knew very little about. Indeed, the London residuary body knew nothing about it, which was proven by the way in which events subsequently unfolded. Criticisms of the London residuary body abound in the text of reports of the Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office.

First, the London residuary body sells county hall. The agreed price is £50 million but Shirayama says that it cannot in fact afford that sum but will pay £42 million. The residuary body says that it will sue but Shirayama asks how it can because Shirayama has no assets in this country. Shirayama agrees to pay £50 million—£40 million down and the other £10 million out of future profits.

There was no bank guarantee, there were confidentiality clauses and there was no contractual arrangement with the London residuary body for Shirayama Shokusan to complete the development. Despite all that, the London residuary body continues to say that it is prepared to accept the deal. The remaining £10 million is supposed to come from profits to the year 2012, but Shirayama then says that it does not expect to make any profits between now and then. London charge payers will therefore have to whistle for that £10 million—they will never see it.

Given what is happening at county hall, anyone who thinks that once public assets are handed to a body such as the London residuary body it will strike a proper deal on behalf of taxpayers and charge payers is whistling in the dark because it is not going to happen. The fact is that Londoners have been robbed by the London residuary body.

I wanted to have the opportunity to sack the incompetent Sir Tag Taylor. My hon. Friends on the Front Bench know that I am not an ambitious man, but I want to take horrible revenge on the London residuary body. I want to introduce an element of red terror to those who have stripped the GLC of its assets and sold so many of them at give-away prices. I want the opportunity to find out where all the bodies are buried. If my hon. Friends will let me do that, I shall die a very happy man.

9.25 pm

Mr. Keith Vaz (Leicester, East): This has been an important debate because it has shown yet again the enormous gulf that exists between the two parties on housing and regeneration issues. The subject matter in the Bill goes to the very heart of three crucial aspects of policy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) is very fond of boxing metaphors. The House will be well aware that today he scored a knockout to add to that given last Thursday, when the verdict of the people of this country on the Government's performance was passed. Conservative seat after Conservative seat fell to Labour. After two drubbings in successive years, even political pundits such as Mr. Peter Snow were struggling on Thursday night to invent a new word more pejorative than "haemorrhaging" to describe the loss of Conservative support.

My hon. Friends have made some excellent contributions to today's debate. They spoke with great passion and conviction because they are fully aware of the impact that the Government have had on their

constituents. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) made a most interesting contribution on yesterday's activities on Guinness land. He fascinated the House with details of the number of people who turned up and the extent of their activities. He rightly said that the House must accept that people have a right to decent accommodation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke–on–Trent, North (Ms Walley) pointed out that the ending of mandatory housing grants will send an earthquake through her constituency. I am determined to be nice about both my Stoke colleagues despite the fact that Leicester City will be playing Stoke on Sunday night for a place at Wembley.

My hon. Friend the Member for Normanton (Mr. O'Brien) was right to complain about the unfairness and injustice of the single regeneration budget. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke–on–Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson) described the ending of mandatory grants as a scandal.

My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike), a former council leader, may not have melted the hearts of housing Ministers as he had wished to do, but he certainly touched the hearts of his Labour colleagues. My hon. Friend the Member for Dudley, West (Mr. Pearson) spoke from enormous experience gained from advising Government offices, training and enterprise councils and other bodies about the single regeneration budget. He said that a balance needed to be struck between the needs of an area and the abilities of the partners to deliver what the SRB had to offer.

My hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) talked of the 15,000 families in Pendle who are living in unfit housing. Finally, if there is an expert on the matter in the House it must be my hon. Friend the Member for Newham, North–West (Mr. Banks), to whom we all pay tribute for his excellent work in exposing the sham of the sale of county hall.

I thank Conservative Members for their contributions to the debate, including the hon. Members for Bolton, North–East (Mr. Thurnham) and for Wyre Forest (Mr. Coombs)—who is not in his place but who must have damned his future ministerial career, but delighted Labour Members, when he asked for the targeting of capital receipts. The hon. Member for Reading, West (Sir A. Durant), who has experience of construction, also made some useful points.

My hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras dealt with the Labour party's objections to the housing and construction provisions of the Bill. I add my tribute to Sir Michael Latham, my former neighbour in Leicestershire. He has received a lot of praise from hon. Members on both sides of the House, so he must be an ideal candidate for canonisation. Perhaps the Secretary of State and I should write a joint letter to the Pope asking him to progress this. I have never heard so much praise heaped on a former Member of the House.

In the time available to me, I intend to deal with the provisions that affect architects and the issues of regeneration policy. All hon. Members would agree that it is important that the profession of architecture is properly regulated and that there is an adequate system of registration. The current arrangements have been in existence for 60 years, so any change is likely to be difficult—as the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman), the only self-confessed architect in this place, explained.

The Bill's provisions on registration and the composition of the board will have to be scrutinised carefully in Committee. The Labour party wants to see increased consumer protection through a revised registration board. However, it is important that the board has the support of the profession. It is clear, from the representations that have been received, that there is widespread concern in the profession about the level of control. We support the views that have been put to the Government, but they have not accepted that there should be a minimalist board that limits the possibility of the needless and expensive duplication of professional services.

Sir Sydney Chapman: The hon. Gentleman may recall my saying that the General Medical Council is about to increase the lay membership of its council from 13 to 25, out of a total membership of 102. If he believes that the majority on the Architects Registration Council of the United Kingdom board—who are lay people—should be increased, does he believe that that should apply to every other profession?

Mr. Vaz: This may be the first step to regulating and registering other professions. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman could raise that if he serves on the Committee. I would like to see better regulation of the legal profession. To be fair to the Secretary of State—we are all delighted that he is here at last, following his various visits to different parts of the country; we try to be fair, compassionate and kind to him when he is present in the House, because someone has to be—it was not he who began the process of dismantling urban Britain; he merely presided over its final collapse.

As hon. Members are aware, the dismantling of regeneration policy began when the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Thames (Mr. Lamont), the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, announced the end of the urban programme in 1992. That announcement was swiftly followed by a letter to the leaders of 57 local authorities formally abolishing the programme. The urban programme was the mainstay of regeneration policy for more than a generation, and it was brought to an end with no consultation and with even less thought.

In the context of the regeneration policy of the Government, the decision to axe the urban programme was perfectly understandable. We have, after all, had 28 different regeneration initiatives over the past 17 years. We have had a bewildering compilation of initiatives, each launched in a blaze of publicity, each reducing the amount of resources and each top-sliced from its predecessor.

Whatever became of the urban partnership fund, the enterprise zones or the 26 other schemes? To my mind, first prize in any regeneration contest must go to the Minister or to the official in the Department of the Environment who dreams up the names of the schemes. He or she should get the Booker prize for fiction. Out of this morass comes the single regeneration budget—no extra resources, no new political direction, just a new name that the Bill seeks to give to a new, all-embracing scheme.

We believe that the philosophy of partnership must be at the heart of regeneration. When we use the word "partnership", we do so to show, in a practical sense, what local government is achieving with its principal partners.

[Mr. Vaz]

Up and down the country, Labour local government has been working for decades to make the partnership ideal a reality. Ministers know for themselves, because they have seen the evidence from the hundreds of photo-calls that they have attended, that the civic leadership of urban Britain, which is exclusively Labour, has delivered all that was promised to its people. We have seen a galaxy of innovative schemes in Manchester, Birmingham, Glasgow, Salford and in countless other towns and cities.

The Secretary of State for the Environment (Mr. John Gummer): I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman would agree that the only reason why Labour local councils enter into any partnership is because they were forced into it by the Government. Until that Government insistence, Labour local councils never entered into partnership with anyone. At the moment, they allow such partnership because they have to. If there were a Labour Government there would be no partnership in local authorities.

Mr. Vaz: The Secretary of State would not know a partner if it sat on his lap and asked for support. The fact is that Labour local government had worked in partnership for decades before the Government decided to jump on the bandwagon. But for the determination of local authorities leaders and those councillors who supported schemes in different towns and cities, such partnership would never have been achieved. Instead of constantly attacking local government and using the most successful schemes for blatant political propaganda, the Government should hail their success and use that good practice as an example to the world.

Robbed of civic pride because of Ministers' pursuit of an outdated anti-municipal ideology, local government has sought to restore that pride to its citizens. It has offered them a better quality of life. Local government has done so with the use of scarce resources, which has been an enormous challenge and, despite ministerial criticism, it has responded magnificently.

There can be no effective regeneration policy without the involvement, support and expertise of the private sector. Business people, however, who are keen to work with local government, have been badly let down by the Conservative party. I have visited hundreds of schemes and met hundreds of business people. It has become clear to me that there is an enormous amount of enthusiasm for potential projects, and a legacy of actual involvement, but real complaint is made that the Government, and this Secretary of State, refuse to listen. The private sector-public sector partnership, so vital to regeneration, has as its cornerstone the recognition of community pride and advancement. Many are shocked at the language used by the Secretary of State in attacking local government. They want to work with local government. The Bill does not help them to do that.

The talent and enterprise exist. Of course the private sector wants a return; it would be absurd and ludicrous to suggest otherwise. But it shares the view of local councils that if, at the end of the regeneration process, there is no physical and social improvement, it is not worth pursuing. The private sector wants to invest and quite rightly requires shared ownership of the regeneration process, provided the economic climate and conditions allow it to do so.

The third partner in the regeneration process, which does not even get a mention in the Bill, is the voluntary sector. To Labour it is an equal partner with the others. Neglected by the Government, who do not even bother to consult it on the Bill or any other issue, it has struggled valiantly as its role and activities have been cut, yet that sector represents organisations at the coal face, which deliver commitments to local people.

The Bill provides a legislative basis for the single regeneration budget, which has already managed two rounds to date. It is an odd situation to pass legislation after the event, but so be it. What has been created is the SRB challenge fund—I am sure hon. Members will note the sporty, competitive name. It will be to the regeneration world what the King George VI cup is to racing and the Benson and Hedges cup is to cricket. Unlike a cricket match, where there is a 50 per cent. chance of winning, the odds are stacked heavily against people in this Government gameshow.

When the SRB was created no extra resources were provided and all the existing programmes were merely added together. Even worse, the number of authorities that would have benefited from the old urban programme has greatly increased while the chances of success have been greatly diminished. If one increases the number of bidders and reduces the amount of funds, one is heading for trouble.

The way in which the competitive process has operated is much worse. It insults the intelligence of those in local government. It uses valuable time, effort and resources. It is an established fact that there should be no guarantees and no blank cheques for public money, but it should also go without saying that to pit great cities and towns against one another—Brighton against Birmingham, Leicester against Luton, Manchester against Maidstone—in that perverse way builds up expectation and provides disappointment and dissatisfaction. It does not take into consideration the issue of need and the circumstances prevailing in each area.

Department of the Environment press releases always dwell on the winners of those competitions, but the figures for failed bids are stark. In round two of the bidding process, the percentage failure rate was as follows: 59 per cent. in the eastern region, 54 per cent. in London, 61 per cent. in the north-west, 54 per cent. in the south-west, 48 per cent. in the north-east and 46 per cent. in Merseyside. Bids worth £480 million, for 156 schemes, were rejected by the Government. No consolation prize exists for those who have lost—only the long wait for the next round of bidding.

Mr. Dover: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Vaz: No.

We have always accepted the need for one cohesive regeneration grant, but Labour will abolish the competitive process as a means of obtaining funds.

We shall create strict criteria that must be met if regeneration funds are to be awarded. Those criteria will encourage those requesting regeneration funds to produce quality, properly costed bids, and they must demonstrate their requests by showing the involvement of their partners, including the private sector. Access to private sector funds will be of utmost importance under a scheme that proposes a standstill budget.

Conservative Governments have always shown a lack of vision. The annuality rules of city challenge, the drive for quick-fix solutions, has not worked. Five years is not long enough to plan or implement a vision statement for a local area. Each area needs to create a strategic plan that takes into account the needs of the local community.

Ministers have long abandoned their role as initiators. Central Government must give the lead, not with imposed ideas, but by signalling political direction. The regional offices must be restructured and made more effective and accountable; there is nothing about that in the Bill.

Two years ago, the Minister then responsible for regeneration, the right hon. Member for Ealing, Acton (Sir G. Young), promised regional regeneration statements for each area. They never arrived. Such statements of aims are crucial if there is to be clarity and certainty about how those requesting funds are to be assessed. The notion that everything should be left to the market is unacceptable.

I believe that there must be a role for entrepreneurs to suggest local projects with which they wish to be involved, provided that they obtain the support of local government.

Mr. Dover: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Vaz: No.

Far too often, the present Government have been obsessed with organisational matters rather than the more important question of what the objectives of those organisations should be. We prefer substance to form. We want things to be achieved, not just talked about.

English Partnerships is a classic example—an organisation in search of a role. I pay tribute to the work of David Taylor, its first chief executive, who had to resign for personal reasons last week. Had it not been for his personality and ability, English Partnerships would have gone adrift some time ago. If there is a need for such an agency, its role must be clearly defined and its regional structure democratic and accountable.

The demise of the urban district councils was planned many, many years ago, yet—alas—the Government do not have a co-ordinated approach as to what is to succeed them. Nowhere is that lack of vision more apparent than in the Government's attitude to the east of London. The Canary Wharf development and the Thames gateway initiative foreshadow a city to the east. As I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Newham, North–West (Mr. Banks) would agree, the development of east London is long overdue. Ministers have not worked to bring together the projects, organisations and local authorities to provide a cohesive policy.

The Bill is entitled the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Bill, yet not one homeless family will be housed as a result of it. Not one extra construction job will be created; not one area will be regenerated. Bereft of ideas and besieged on all sides, the Government limp on to defeat—if not tonight, then certainly at the polls. It is a hopeless Bill, from a hopeless Government.

9.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment (Mr. James Clappison): I welcome the opportunity to respond to the debate on an important Bill which introduces significant reforms. In opening the debate, the Minister for Construction, Planning and Energy Efficiency, my hon. Friend the Member for West Hertfordshire (Mr. Jones), identified the areas that will benefit from the reforms. In the construction industry, much needed and much anticipated reforms will deliver a more competitive industry with wider benefits to the economy and important benefits to construction clients.

The Bill provides a more flexible system of renovation grants, with more discretion for local authorities. It introduces important reforms to the architects profession and to the single regeneration budget. Those significant reforms have been widely welcomed outside the Chamber.

I found the response of the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) somewhat disappointing in the face of those significant reforms. He began his speech by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Greenwich (Mr. Raynsford), whom he described as truly learned. I am conscious of the natural modesty of the hon. Member for Greenwich and I do not think that it is fair or proper for me to offer a judgment in that regard. However, having described his hon. Friend as more learned than he, it is fair to say that the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras did little to disprove that proposition in the remainder of his speech. His speech was not learned, judicial or legal—in fact, it reminded me of the work of a dodgy builder.

Like any dodgy builder, the hon. Gentleman began with a job lot left over from his previous speech. Many of his remarks seemed to come from his contribution to the Housing Bill debate and properly belonged there. As his speech progressed, it became clear that his material had been rejected. He made the most bogus of all bogus comparisons by contrasting council house building now with the building rate under the last Labour Government. He knows perfectly well that, in so doing, he is not comparing like with like. He ignores the important provision that the Government make in a wide variety of other ways, including through housing associations.

I shall not be tempted further down that path as I do not wish to stray from the subject of this important debate. The hon. Gentleman committed another sin of the dodgy builder: he started constructing his argument without any idea of what he wanted to achieve—he gave no indication of what he intended to build. When it came to the point that really mattered—whether he would make a commitment to meet demand-led mandatory grants—the hon. Gentleman was silent. Hon. Members will have noted the obvious way in which he avoided that commitment.

The hon. Gentleman's evasion was all the more striking in the face of the clarion calls from the hon. Members for Pendle (Mr. Prentice), for Burnley (Mr. Pike), for Newham, North-East (Mr. Timms), for Dudley, West (Mr. Pearson) and many others who asked for more resources to meet demand-led mandatory grants. The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras was not prepared to give that commitment. He gave no indication of his intentions and he remained silent and embarrassed when a commitment was sought.

The hon. Gentleman then called for close scrutiny of the Bill in Committee. We did not get off to a promising start when he referred to the subject of adjudication and entirely ignored the clear commitment given by my hon.

[Mr. James Clappison]

Friend in opening the debate. My hon. Friend made it quite clear that we do not intend adjudication to be final and binding. The hon. Gentleman somehow failed to hear my hon. Friend say that we intend to propose that parties should be required to abide by an adjudicator's decision until practical completion of the contract, but that thereafter they may reopen the dispute.

Mr. Dobson: If the Minister looks at the *Hansard*, he will find that I said that the Government's original proposition would have made the adjudicator give a decision that was not just binding, but final. I was not talking about the Minister's comments. I said that we cannot believe a word that Ministers say at the Dispatch Box because Labour Members remember the Government's promise not to privatise Railtrack.

Mr. Clappison: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman's position has not improved. He called for scrutiny in Committee. What is the point of calling for scrutiny unless it relates to what is currently proposed?

The hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) compared the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras with a boxer who had scored a knock-out. Although it might do wonders for the hon. Member for Leicester, East by providing him with a future career as a boxing promoter, as a boxing fan and member of the public, I would not buy tickets on the strength of that comment.

The hon. Member for Leicester, East said something interesting at the end of his speech. If I heard him aright, he said that Labour would provide no extra money for the single regeneration budget. I take that to be the definite intention behind the hon. Gentleman's speech—and he seems to accept it. He did not say what would happen to the single regeneration budget if there were more bids than there were resources available. That is another interesting question that remains open.

We heard some excellent speeches from my hon. Friends. My hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) spoke with great authority as a chartered architect. He described himself as belonging to an endangered species as he is both an architect and a Member of Parliament. He could not think of any other hon. Members who were architects. I remind him that Sir Christopher Wren was also an architect and a Member of Parliament—a comparison not entirely uncalled for in the circumstances.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet was absolutely right, as were other hon. Members who spoke from professional experience, when he talked about the problems in the construction industry, which has been plagued by disputes and late payments. He was absolutely right to say that cash flow was vital and that the industry could be more efficient, more competitive and less adversarial. He was entirely right in his comments and in his support of the Bill.

The right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) made a speech that the hon. Member for Leicester, East described as interesting in a rather chilling way. The right hon. Gentleman is a senior member of the House and I always enjoy his speeches, although I do not often agree with them. When he called for common ownership of land, my enjoyment of his speech was somewhat greater than that of his colleagues on the Opposition Front Bench. Their pleasure and enjoyment of his speech seemed to vary inversely with the feeling of pleasure of those on the Back Benches surrounding the right hon. Gentleman when he spoke about common ownership of land. His comments seemed to cause a certain amount of discomfort.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, North–East (Mr. Thurnham), who also has a long-term interest in the construction industry, made a constructive speech. He highlighted his connection with the industry through the Electrical Contractors Association. He asked an important question in respect of process work—whether maintenance and repair work would be included. I am pleased to tell him that building and civil engineering repair work will be included, as will maintenance work in so as far as it involves construction operations such as repair, restoration and redecoration. I can also assuage his concern about design work, as clause 104 covers the design work of all professionals in the construction industry.

The House will be aware of my hon. Friend's concern for disabled people. He referred to the part M of the building regulations. He will know that we have received a large number of representations on that and we currently considering them.

The hon. Member for Christchurch (Mrs. Maddock) also welcomed many of our proposals, particularly in respect of the disabled facilities grant. She recognised the assistance that the Bill will provide through the extra discretionary help that will be available and the changes to the means test that will provide assistance to more disabled people. She also welcomed the extension of the grant to those living in park homes and mobile homes.

The hon. Lady mentioned the English house condition survey, to which I hope to refer later, and made some comments about unfit homes in the private rented sector. The most recent English house condition survey covering the period from 1986 to 1991 shows a reduction in the number of unfit homes in the private rented sector. Contrary to what the hon. Lady said, much of what has been brought about by way of deregulation has improved the condition of properties in the private rented sector.

Mrs. Maddock: Perhaps I can clarify that point. I quoted from a further survey by the National Home Improvement Council which showed that the report that the Minister has just mentioned was not holding up and that conditions were getting worse.

Mr. Clappison: The hon. Lady placed reliance elsewhere in her speech on the English house condition survey, which clearly showed a big improvement in the private rented sector.

Mr. Ainger *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Clappison: It did.

Mr. Dobson: My hon. Friend is the expert.

Mr. Clappison: I would not rely too much on that proposition, in view of the hon. Gentleman's other propositions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Dover) also made an important contribution. He paid tribute to the Urban Development Corporation, which he helped to bring about, and spoke from his experience as chief executive of the National Building Agency. My hon. Friend was clear about the benefits that the Bill will bring to the construction industry.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mr. Coombs) gave the Bill a general welcome. We greatly hope that the availability of adjudication will prove an effective method for resolving disputes, and will prevent many disputes arising in the first place—thus reducing the amount of litigation. My hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East (Sir G. Vaughan) made a pertinent speech. We will consider the implementation date most sympathetically.

The proposed reforms in respect of the construction industry have been welcomed in all parts of the House, especially by my right hon. and hon. Friends. I add to the tributes paid by many hon. Members to the work of Sir Michael Latham. The House would do well to remember Sir Michael's injunction to take reform seriously and pursue it speedily. His report called for the Government to take the initiative:

> "The initiative must be taken by Government, in conjunction with major clients and other leaders of the construction process. If this opportunity is not taken, it may not recur for many years, and a new report may be commissioned in the year 2024 to go over the same ground again."

The Government are taking the initiative, in all the ways that my hon. Friends have explained, through the working group and important reforms on payment and adjudication, which have been welcomed throughout the House. I hope that the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras, in his blanket opposition to the Bill, will not do anything to undermine those important reforms.

With regard to home renovation, the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras spoke at length about the effects of the conditions relating to unfit properties. We are also concerned about such properties, but the hon. Gentleman should bear in mind that the English house conditions survey showed a substantial reduction of 7 per cent. in the number of unfit occupied private sector homes between 1986 and 1991. The hon. Gentleman rightly referred to changes in the criteria, but they were made less stringent. If the hon. Gentleman will compare the figures for 1981 and 1991, he will find a substantial reduction in the number of unfit properties over that period. After 10 years of Conservative government, the position was much better than in 1981, after five years of Labour Government. The situation in 1991 was 50 per cent. better.

The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras should remember also that home owners must in the first instance take responsibility for their properties, and that is governed by general economic conditions. There has been a big improvement under this Government. Many more families have homes which have the benefit of double glazing, central heating, indoor toilets and other basic facilities than when Labour last held office. At that time, fewer than half the dwellings had central heating, and nearly 5 per cent. of properties were without inside toilets. There was little improvement during those years. Families did not have the basic facilities that they take for granted today. The improvement has been brought about by a healthy, well-managed economy which gives prosperity to home owners, brings the benefits of sustained economic growth, low inflation and low interest rates and allows people to invest in their own homes.

There have been substantial improvements and we shall bring about more improvements as a result of the Bill. The people of this country are better housed in better conditions than ever before.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 288, Noes 257.

Division No. 120] **[10.00 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(East Surrey)*
Aitken, Rt Hon Jonathan
Alexander, Richard
Alison, Rt Hon Michael *(Selby)*
Allason, Rupert *(Torbay)*
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, James
Arnold, Jacques *(Gravesham)*
Atkins, Rt Hon Robert
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Nicholas *(North Dorset)*
Baldry, Tony
Banks, Matthew *(Southport)*
Banks, Robert *(Harrogate)*
Bates, Michael
Batiste, Spencer
Bellingham, Henry
Bendall, Vivian
Beresford, Sir Paul
Body, Sir Richard
Bonsor, Sir Nicholas
Booth, Hartley
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Eltham)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Virginia
Bowis, John
Boyson, Rt Hon Sir Rhodes
Brandreth, Gyles
Brazier, Julian
Bright, Sir Graham
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Brown, M *(Brigg & Cl'thorpes)*
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(South Dorset)*
Budgen, Nicholas
Burt, Alistair
Butcher, John
Butler, Peter
Butterfill, John
Carlisle, John *(Luton North)*
Carlisle, Sir Kenneth *(Lincoln)*
Carrington, Matthew
Carttiss, Michael
Cash, William
Channon, Rt Hon Paul
Chapman, Sir Sydney
Churchill, Mr
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rochford)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Ru'cliff)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coe, Sebastian
Colvin, Michael
Congdon, David
Coombs, Anthony *(Wyre For'st)*
Coombs, Simon *(Swindon)*
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Couchman, James
Cran, James
Currie, Mrs Edwina *(S D'by'ire)*
Curry, David *(Skipton & Ripon)*
Davies, Quentin *(Stamford)*
Davis, David *(Boothferry)*
Day, Stephen
Deva, Nirj Joseph
Devlin, Tim
Dicks, Terry
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James
Dover, Den
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Dunn, Bob
Durant, Sir Anthony
Elletson, Harold
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, David *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Evans, Jonathan *(Brecon)*
Evans, Nigel *(Ribble Valley)*
Evans, Roger *(Monmouth)*
Evennett, David
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fenner, Dame Peggy
Field, Barry *(Isle of Wight)*
Forman, Nigel
Forsythe, Clifford *(S Antrim)*
Forth, Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam *(Woodspring)*
Fox, Rt Hon Sir Marcus *(Shipley)*
Freeman, Rt Hon Roger
French, Douglas
Fry, Sir Peter
Gale, Roger
Gallie, Phil
Gardiner, Sir George
Garnier, Edward
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Alastair
Goodson-Wickes, Dr Charles
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorst, Sir John
Grant, Sir A *(SW Cambs)*
Greenway, Harry *(Ealing N)*
Greenway, John *(Ryedale)*
Griffiths, Peter *(Portsmouth, N)*
Grylls, Sir Michael
Gummer, Rt Hon John Selwyn
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archibald
Hamilton, Neil *(Tatton)*
Hampson, Dr Keith
Hanley, Rt Hon Jeremy
Hannam, Sir John
Hargreaves, Andrew
Harris, David

Haselhurst, Sir Alan
Hawkins, Nick
Hawksley, Warren
Hayes, Jerry
Heald, Oliver
Heath, Rt Hon Sir Edward
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hendry, Charles
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hicks, Robert
Higgins, Rt Hon Sir Terence
Hill, James *(Soul'hampton Test)*
Horam, John
Hordern, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howell, Rt Hon David *(G'dford)*
Howell, Sir Ralph *(N Norfolk)*
Hughes, Robert G *(Harrow W)*
Hunt, Rt Hon David *(Wirral W)*
Hunt, Sir John *(Ravensbourne)*
Hunter, Andrew
Hurd, Rt Hon Douglas
Jack, Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Jessel, Toby
Johnson Smith, Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Gwilym *(Cardiff N)*
Jones, Robert B *(W Hertfdshr)*
Kellett-Bowman, Dame Elaine
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom
Kirkhope, Timothy
Knapman, Roger
Knight, Mrs Angela *(Erewash)*
Knight, Rt Hon Greg *(Derby N)*
Knight, Dame Jill *(Bir'm E'st'n)*
Knox, Sir David
Kynoch, George *(Kincardine)*
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamont, Rt Hon Norman
Lang, Rt Hon Ian
Lawrence, Sir Ivan
Legg, Barry
Leigh, Edward
Lennox-Boyd, Sir Mark
Lester, Sir James *(Broxtowe)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Lord, Michael
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maitland, Lady Olga
Major, Rt Hon John
Malone, Gerald
Mans, Keith
Marland, Paul
Marshall, Sir Michael *(Arundel)*
Martin, David *(Portsmouth S)*
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
Mayhew, Rt Hon Sir Patrick
Merchant, Piers
Mills, Iain
Mitchell, Andrew *(Gedling)*
Mitchell, Sir David *(NW Hants)*
Molyneaux, Rt Hon Sir James
Monro, Rt Hon Sir Hector
Montgomery, Sir Fergus
Nelson, Anthony
Neubert, Sir Michael
Newton, Rt Hon Tony
Nicholls, Patrick
Nicholson, David *(Taunton)*
Norris, Steve
Onslow, Rt Hon Sir Cranley
Oppenheim, Phillip
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Patnick, Sir Irvine
Patten, Rt Hon John
Pattie, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Pawsey, James
Pickles, Eric
Porter, Barry *(Wirral S)*
Porter, David *(Waveney)*
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Rathbone, Tim
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Renton, Rt Hon Tim
Richards, Rod
Riddick, Graham
Rifkind, Rt Hon Malcolm
Robathan, Andrew
Roberts, Rt Hon Sir Wyn
Robertson, Raymond *(Ab'd'n S)*
Robinson, Mark *(Somerton)*
Ross, William *(E Londonderry)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Mid Kent)*
Rumbold, Rt Hon Dame Angela
Sainsbury, Rt Hon Sir Timothy
Scott, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
Shaw, David *(Dover)*
Shaw, Sir Giles *(Pudsey)*
Shephard, Rt Hon Gillian
Shepherd, Sir Colin *(Hereford)*
Shepherd, Richard *(Aldridge)*
Shersby, Sir Michael
Skeet, Sir Trevor
Smith, Tim *(Beaconsfield)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir James *(W Dorset)*
Spicer, Sir Michael *(S Worcs)*
Spink, Dr Robert
Sproat, Iain
Squire, Robin *(Hornchurch)*
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stephen, Michael
Stern, Michael
Stewart, Allan
Streeter, Gary
Sumberg, David
Sweeney, Walter
Sykes, John
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy *(Southend, E)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomason, Roy
Thompson, Sir Donald *(C'er V)*
Thompson, Patrick *(Norwich N)*
Thurnham, Peter
Townend, John *(Bridlington)*
Townsend, Cyril D *(Bexl'yh'th)*
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Trotter, Neville
Twinn, Dr Ian
Vaughan, Sir Gerard
Viggers, Peter
Waldegrave, Rt Hon William
Walden, George
Walker, Bill *(N Tayside)*
Waller, Gary
Ward, John
Wardle, Charles *(Bexhill)*
Waterson, Nigel
Watts, John
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Ray
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Ann
Wiggin, Sir Jerry
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macc'fld)*
Wolfson, Mark
Wood, Timothy
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Derek Conway and
Mr. Simon Burns.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Alton, David
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Banks, Tony *(Newham NW)*
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beckett, Rt Hon Margaret
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Betts, Clive
Blunkett, David
Boateng, Paul
Bradley, Keith
Bray, Dr Jeremy
Brown, N *(N'c'tle upon Tyne E)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burden, Richard
Byers, Stephen
Caborn, Richard
Callaghan, Jim
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(Fife NE)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Carlile, Alexander *(Montgomery)*
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Church, Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr David *(South Shields)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tom *(Monklands W)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Mrs Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Covy SE)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Alistair
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Bryan *(Oldham C'tral)*
Davies, Chris *(L'Boro & S'worth)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Denham, John
Dewar, Donald
Dixon, Don
Dobson, Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eastham, Ken
Etherington, Bill
Evans, John *(St Helens N)*
Fatchett, Derek
Faulds, Andrew
Field, Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foulkes, George
Fraser, John
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Garrett, John
George, Bruce
Gerrard, Neil
Gilbert, Rt Hon Dr John
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mildred
Graham, Thomas
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Ms Harriet
Harvey, Nick
Hattersley, Rt Hon Roy
Henderson, Doug
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hoey, Kate
Hogg, Norman *(Cumbernauld)*
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Howarth, Alan *(Strat'rd-on-A)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley North)*
Howells, Dr Kim *(Pontypridd)*
Hoyle, Doug
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Robert *(Aberdeen N)*
Hughes, Roy *(Newport E)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark)*
Hutton, John
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Glenda *(H'stead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Shef'ld, H)*

Jamieson, David
Janner, Greville
Jenkins, Brian *(SE Staff)*
Johnston, Sir Russell
Jones, Barry *(Alyn and D'side)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Lynne *(B'ham S O)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd, SW)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Tessa
Keen, Alan
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross,C&S)*
Kennedy, Jane *(L'pool Br'dg'n)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kirkwood, Archy
Lestor, Joan *(Eccles)*
Litherland, Robert
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Stretford)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lynne, Ms Liz
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCartney, Ian
McFall, John
McKelvey, William
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
McMaster, Gordon
McNamara, Kevin
MacShane, Denis
McWilliam, John
Madden, Max
Maddock, Diana
Mandelson, Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester, S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Michael
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffield Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Rhodri
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Alfred *(Wy'nshawe)*
Morris, Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mowlam, Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Paul
O'Brien, Mike *(N W'kshire)*
O'Brien, William *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Orme, Rt Hon Stanley
Parry, Robert
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pike, Peter L
Pope, Greg
Powell, Ray *(Ogmore)*
Prentice, Bridget *(Lew'm E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Quin, Ms Joyce
Radice, Giles
Randall, Stuart
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Dr John
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Co'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruddock, Joan
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shore, Rt Hon Peter
Short, Clare
Simpson, Alan
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Chris *(Is'ton S & F'sbury)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spearing, Nigel
Spellar, John
Steel, Rt Hon Sir David
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stott, Roger
Strang, Dr. Gavin
Straw, Jack
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strgfd)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Walker, Rt Hon Sir Harold
Walley, Joan
Wardell, Gareth *(Gower)*
Watson, Mike
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Sw'n W)*
Williams, Alan W *(Carmarthen)*
Worthington, Tony
Wray, Jimmy
Wright, Dr Tony
Young, David *(Bolton SE)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Ms Ann Coffey and
Ms Janet Anderson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 61 (Committal of Bills).

HOUSING GRANTS, CONSTRUCTION AND REGENERATION BILL *[Lords]* [*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No.50A(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Bill *[Lords]*, it is expedient to authorise—

(a) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(i) any expenses of the Secretary of State incurred in consequence of the Act,

(ii) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable out of money so provided under any other enactment;

(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable out of the Consolidated Fund or the National Loans Fund under any other enactment; and

(c) the payment into the Consolidated Fund or the National Loans Fund of any sums received under or by virtue of the Act.—*[Mr. Wells.]*

Question agreed to.

Civil Service Pension Schemes

10.16 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service (Mr. David Willetts): I beg to move,

That the draft Contracting Out (Administration of Civil Service Pension Schemes) Order 1996, which was laid before this House on 25th March, be approved.

The order is being introduced as part of the Government's drive to improve the quality of public services and to develop better, more efficient methods of delivering those services. The Government's "Competing for Quality" programme has produced a sea change in the way in which public services are delivered.

Competition has led to better value for money for the taxpayer. In the three years since the "Competing for Quality" programme has been operating, Departments have reviewed in all £2.6 billion-worth of activities, producing savings to the taxpayer of well over £500 million—in excess of 20 per cent. on average. Competition has also produced higher standards of service for the customer.

The order is to be made under section 69 of the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994. It specifies administration of the principal civil service pension scheme and associated schemes as a function that external contractors may be authorised to undertake. At present, under the Superannuation Act 1972, only public servants may undertake that function.

Section 1(1) of the Superannuation Act provides that the Minister responsible for the civil service may make, maintain and administer superannuation schemes for persons employed in the civil service and related organisations. Responsibility for day-to-day administration of civil service pension and compensation arrangements is formally delegated under the 1972 Act to employing Departments and agencies. They can either perform the full administration function in house or buy in services from other providers in government.

The order will make it possible for private sector providers to compete for the business and thus extend the choice available to employing Departments and agencies. The civil service unions and the Civil Service Pensioners Alliance have been formally consulted on the draft order.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): Have they agreed?

Mr. Willetts: The anxieties expressed by the civil service unions and the pensioners alliance focused particularly on the future value of their pensions—a subject on which we have been able to give them cast-iron assurances, to which I shall turn later.

Mr. Field: While the Government are the proper custodian of the public interest here, the whole push of Government policy is to take into account the consumer's views about public services. The consumers in this case are civil servants and retired civil servants. To what extent do those two groups support the changes that the Government propose this evening?

Mr. Willetts: There is certainly widespread recognition among pensioners that the service that they receive is in general of a good standard, but it does not follow from that that it is not possible to improve further on standards. If it is possible, of course we look to do so.

An efficiency scrutiny of the civil service pension schemes recommended:

"Departments should be encouraged to market test their pension operations."

Approval of this order will permit Departments to test this area of activity against alternative sources in the market. The aim is to give improved quality of service to scheme members and to provide better value for money for the taxpayer. Decisions on the timing and other arrangements for market tests will be the responsibility of the individual Departments. It will be open to existing service providers to compete on a value for money basis.

Mr. John Garrett (Norwich, South): In what areas does the Minister envisage the quality of service being improved?

Mr. Willetts: If we knew all the ways in which the quality of service would be improved, we would not need to engage in a market test. One of the purposes of a market test is to discover whether there are better ways of doing things and to take advantage of technological improvements, from which all parts of the service will be able to benefit when we bring in the new computer software package that will be available from July. The improved software package will make extra quality of service possible that currently is not possible. We shall find out which organisations can best deliver that quality of service.

Ms Judith Church (Dagenham): What criteria will be used in determining who will administer the pension scheme in the future? On what criteria will the Minister judge the bids?

Mr. Willetts: The basic criteria will be the same as other cases in which we apply the "Competing for Quality" initiative—quality of service, efficiency of service delivery and scope for savings in the cost of administration of the public service. If existing in-service providers are as good as their defenders maintain, they should be able to win contracts as a result of the initiative. We do not rule out in-service bids.

I should explain that the order relates solely to administration of the civil service schemes. Administration covers such activities as scheme induction, calculation of benefits, answering inquiries, maintenance of personnel data, processing applications to buy added years or pay additional voluntary contributions and paying pensions.

Mr. Tim Devlin (Stockton, South): On that basis, can my hon. Friend give me an assurance that the value of the funds invested on behalf of the civil service pensions will not be affected by the proposed order, and that we are talking solely about the administration of the scheme rather than the benefits which will be available to members?

Mr. Willetts: While the civil service pension schemes are not themselves funded, I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that he seeks on the fundamental point that the value of the pensions earned by civil servants will be completely unaffected by these changes. My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to that fundamental issue.

A number of hon. Members have written to Ministers on behalf of constituents and local branches of the Civil Service Pensioners Alliance expressing concern about the implications of the order for both the active and retired membership of the schemes. I can reassure the House on that, because occupational pensions for civil servants will continue to be provided under the civil service pension scheme. The pensions of scheme members will not be affected.

Competitive tendering for the administration function involves no changes in the benefits provided by the scheme and the pensions of retired members will continue to be increased annually in accordance with the Pensions (Increase) Acts. The Minister for the Civil Service will remain responsible to the House for the development of the scheme and also for the rules setting out the benefits and entitlements of scheme members. There is no pension fund, so there are no fund assets which could be put at risk. Cabinet Office Ministers will continue to account to Parliament for expenditure on the civil superannuation vote.

A contractor will not be allowed to advise civil servants on whether to join or leave the scheme or about the merits of individuals making additional voluntary contributions or buying added years. Explanatory booklets for scheme members will continue to be published by my Department. Steps will be taken to maintain confidentiality of personnel records. Computerised records will, of course, be covered by the Data Protection Act 1984. In any market test, appropriate service standards for scheme administration of the principal civil service pension scheme will be set. Any contract will require a standard of service at least as high as that under existing arrangements. Those standards will apply from the outset.

A new pensions administration software package tailored to the requirements of the civil service schemes is being procured by my Department. It will become available in July. It will enable the adoption of more efficient and innovative approaches to scheme administration, such as a one-stop shop for serving scheme members. It will enable service levels to scheme members to be raised while significantly reducing cost. The software will be portable between providers, enabling new players, including small businesses, to enter the marketplace. It will make market testing particularly effective.

A series of competitive tendering exercises will offer the work in manageable parcels. That will encourage new and existing third-party administrators to compete effectively for the business and so offer Departments and agencies several alternative suppliers from which to choose. In conclusion, I quote from the Treasury and Civil Service Select Committee:

"The quest for greater effectiveness and efficiency in the Civil Service is an unending one; the requirement to maximise the return from finite resources will not go away."

Mr. Garrett: How can it be more efficient to split the administration of the civil service pension scheme over a multiplicity of small or medium-sized contractors instead of being organised at one central point as it is now? Secondly, how many people are employed, and are therefore likely to face redundancy, in administering the existing system?

Mr. Willetts: First, the administration of the schemes is the responsibility of Departments. One possibility that results from our "Competing for Quality" initiative is for new consortia to be assembled with several Departments getting together. There is no reason why there should be any fragmentation. On the second point, the overall pensions administration, including both entitlements and payments out, involves approximately 800 staff. I am not in a position to give any figures for redundancies. We may well find that the in-house providers, if they are as good as their defenders say, win the contracts.

I believe that this proposal will raise standards of service to scheme members and secure best value for money in the administration of the scheme, while the pension entitlement of scheme members will not be affected. I commend the draft order to the House.

10.27 pm

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): The order concerns the administration of the principal civil service pension scheme, which has about 500,000 active members, 520,000 pensioners and 170,000 preserved pensions. May I be so indelicate as to remind the Minister that many of those members live in marginal seats? After the humiliation of the South-East Staffordshire by-election and their severe drubbing at the local elections, a reasonable person might think that the Government would make moves to reassure such an important group of voters. Not a bit of it. They insist on flouting Lord Healey's first law of holes, "If you're in a hole, stop digging." The Government, egged on by the Minister in his ceaseless quest for more productivity, are throwing out the shovels and bringing in the excavators.

Their pensions are important investments to civil servants—next to their homes, the most important investment. The Minister told the House that the order will not affect their pensions in any way, merely the administration of the pensions. He did not quite say that civil service pensions are safe in the Government's hands but I am certain that he will when he replies. The evil Opposition and the wicked civil service unions are cruelly stirring up needless alarm.

I must tell the Minister that there is no need to stir up alarm. Civil servants are already alarmed. Why? They do not trust the Government. That should not surprise the Minister. No one trusts this Government, not even their own Back Benchers.

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman (Lancaster): Oh, yes we do.

Mr. Foster: At last, a loyal Government supporter—a miracle to behold and to be congratulated.

The Minister will have seen the ICM poll published in the *Observer* last Sunday. It shows that insecurity has risen sharply during the 1990s and has spread to people of all ages, regions and social groups. He should know that insecurity is widespread throughout the civil service. The MORI poll is evidence, as is the recent poll of civil servants published in the *Observer*. In that poll, 92 per cent. believed that civil service morale was quite or very bad and 73 per cent. would not advise the next generation to join the civil service. Even Sir Robin Butler himself, in an interview in the *Observer* last November, admitted that the changes sweeping through Whitehall had sapped morale and created a climate of insecurity.

[Mr. Foster]

Since 1979, 250,000 civil service jobs have been lost. The civil service has been market tested, contracted out and privatised. Who can be surprised if there is a climate of insecurity? Civil servants know that their jobs are not safe in the Government's hands. How can they be expected to trust the Government with their pensions?

As the Minister said, the Council of Civil Service Unions, which represents the majority of people in the scheme, has been consulted, as has the Civil Service Pensioners Alliance, which has more than 70,000 members among retired civil servants. Both organisations are vehemently opposed to the Government's proposals. Why did the Minister tell us that? There is no support for the order among civil servants, civil service pensioners or deferred civil service pensioners.

Despite Government assurances, which the Minister has repeated tonight, civil servants and civil service pensioners remain concerned that the order is an early stage in the process of breaking up and destroying the principle civil service pension scheme. Already, Public Service Ministers have delegated to Departments responsibility for pensions administration. The order will allow them to contract out the work to private-sector organisations. Fortunately, as the Minister said, the order relates only to the administration of the pension scheme and not to Public Service Ministers' responsibility to make and maintain the scheme. However, with their lack of trust in the Government, civil servants fear that that will be the next step.

It is clear that the term administration of the scheme relates both to making awards and payment of pensions. Consequently, the order will remove the present statutory obstacles to the privatisation of that part of the Office of Her Majesty's Paymaster General that pays public sector pensions. Without the order, a privatised Paymaster—the Government intend to privatise it—would be unable either to undertake administration work or to pay public service pensions.

The Minister extensively quoted the 1992 efficiency scrutiny to justify the proposals, but it contains a considerable amount of information that can be used to support arguments for maintaining the status quo—for example, the cost of pensions administration. In 1991-92, that cost was £25 million compared with the then gross cost of civil service pension payments of nearly £2 billion—that is found in paragraph 7. I take Paymaster as an example. It represents the largest share—36 per cent.—of the cost of civil service pensions administration and pays pensions to 1.5 million public servants, including teachers and NHS staff.

Paragraph 23 of the efficiency unit report says:

"it thereby achieves great economies of scale"—

a point hinted at by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Garrett). Paragraph 24 goes on:

"the PGO's unit costs . . . are currently around £16, which is broadly in line with what the private sector would charge for a large scale pension paying service."

Other than market testing, almost all the recommendations of that efficiency scrutiny have been or are being implemented. Already considerable benefits are accruing. Even greater efficiencies will be possible when the new information technology software, produced by the civil service pensions division, is introduced shortly. If outside organisations are allowed to take over the administration of the pension scheme, the software will be made available to them free of charge. In other words, private contractors will be subsidised by the taxpayer to take over the jobs of civil servants.

One of the recommendations of the efficiency scrutiny which has already been implemented is the delegation of responsibility for administration from central Departments to Departments and agencies. There are already a number of very satisfactory pension administration providers within the civil service. In addition to Paymaster, they include the Inland Revenue, the Department of Social Security, the Department for Education and Employment, the Ministry of Defence and the Home Office. Consequently, an internal market already exists. Departments have a choice of providers, all of whom have very considerable expertise in administering large-scale public sector pensions.

The efficiency scrutiny recognises that

"most large employers with above say 1,000 staff run their own employers scheme and administer it in-house. The pension consulting and insurance firms manage many schemes for employers, but most of these are schemes with less than 1,000 members. A few are between 1,000 and 2,000 members, and a very small number are larger than that. Where larger schemes are contracted out—and there are a handful of examples—it tends to be for particular reasons reflecting a strategic decision on the part of management".

It goes on, in paragraph 52, to produce a draft which

"suggests that above about 20,000 staff-in-house operations are actually cheaper than contracting out".

Mr. Willetts: I invite the right hon. Gentleman to complete the sentence, which goes on to say:

"this is not, of course, a reason for not testing the market".

Mr. Foster: The Minister anticipates me; I was going to quote those very words, which I shall not now do.

Paragraph 56 of the efficiency scrutiny claims:

"it is thought that the efficiency of contracted out pensions administration is likely to improve significantly over the next few years as new technology is introduced"—

that is under the present arrangements, of course. Civil servants and civil service pensioners object most strongly to their pensions and their pension scheme being used to allow the private sector to experiment to improve its own efficiency. The pensions of civil servants—indeed, any pensions—are far too important to be used as training aids for inexperienced contractors.

A detailed study of paragraphs 49 to 60 of the efficiency unit scrutiny develops no convincing arguments for market testing, other than that it is a central policy of the Government. The case is not made that the private sector is more efficient or more effective in administering pensions on the scale of those in the civil service. Civil servants and civil service pensioners are not dogmatically opposed to the private sector or to the proper use of outside expertise in relation to their pension scheme.

A private sector organisation, Triskels, has worked closely with civil service pensions to improve communications and to produce a new series of explanatory booklets on the scheme. This work has been of the highest quality and has much to recommend it.

Again, the case is not made for there being greater expertise in the private sector in administering the schemes.

In the Government's consultations of regulations arising from the Pension Act 1995 and the Occupational Pension Scheme (Transfer Values) Regulations 1996 responses have demonstrated concerns about the efficiency of out-sourced pension administrations. I shall quote the third paragraph of a letter from the Department of Social Security dated 15 March:

"During the consultation process which has been ongoing since last summer, some commentators have suggested that the period proposed for providing a guaranteed statement to the member (effectively 7 working days excluding weekends) was too short. Schemes which had "outsourced" their pension administration would face real difficulties in complying with the deadline."

Civil servants and civil service pensioners are content with the service that they get from the present in-house scheme administrators. They would certainly object to the administration being transferred to private sector organisations that cannot respond quickly to the demands of members.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Mid-Kent): I am listening to the hon. Gentleman very carefully. Is he referring to organisations that have assets to manage or to the notional schemes with which the public sector is concerned? It seems to me that providing information rapidly on the basis of an entirely notional scheme is much less problematic than providing information rapidly on a scheme in which there are real assets and real investments to measure up.

Mr. Foster: I was making the point that problems have already been discovered in those companies that have out-sourced their pension schemes. This is recognised by Government Departments, such as the Department of Social Security. Clearly, existing pensioners and members of the scheme are more than satisfied with the service that they currently receive. They do not want to risk that standard of service by being contracted out to organisations that do not have the expertise or the experience of large schemes.

In preparing the efficiency unit scrutiny, the Treasury commissioned two independent surveys by the Wyatt company to ascertain the views of recent leavers from the civil service and current members of staff about the pension scheme. Of the leavers, more than 60 per cent. responded positively. They thought that the service was efficient and sensitive. I contend that the figure would be much higher now given the in-house improvements in efficiency that have been made.

None of the surveys showed any support for market testing or contracting out. However, if Ministers are so convinced that their current proposals are in the best interests of civil servants and of civil service pensioners, they should have the courage of their convictions. They should commission yet another survey, perhaps again from the Wyatt company, to test support among civil servants and civil service pensioners.

Dr. John Marek (Wrexham): My right hon. Friend is making a most telling case. He must know that the Minister is a civil service leaver, and I wonder whether he has a preserved pension. Perhaps the Minister is not concerned about the proposal and has given precedence to dogma over common sense. I should have thought that if he were concerned, as a civil servant, about his colleagues in the civil service, he would weigh my right hon. Friend's words carefully. I should have thought that he would want to propose at the Dispatch Box those policies that have the support of his one-time colleagues instead of proposing, as appears to me from listening to his speech, a bit of dogma that has no backbone of support from his former colleagues.

Mr. Foster: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention and I am sure that his remarks have been well noted by the Minister, who may have the opportunity to reply to them when he responds to the debate.

I am inviting the Minister to conduct another survey to test the opinion of civil servants and civil service pensioners. After all, the Government readily concede that members of pension schemes have rights. That principle should apply as much to civil servants as to former employees of Robert Maxwell.

On behalf of the Opposition, I join the civil service unions and the Civil Service Pensioners Alliance in challenging the Government to let civil servants and civil service pensioners decide the future administration of their scheme. Perhaps the Minister will respond to that challenge when he replies to the debate.

I must ask what the order is for. Why are the Government so determined to make themselves so unpopular with so many people, for so little return? The current scheme is efficiently administered, as admitted in the scrutiny report. The members of the scheme are perfectly content with the current arrangements. If the Government's intention was to squeeze further efficiency from the administration of the scheme, they could do that within the internal market now operating. So why is the Minister bothering to create all that hassle for his Government? Is not the real reason the Government's wish to privatise Paymaster? Without the order, a privatised Paymaster could not tender for the contract. Without that substantial contract, Paymaster would be a far less attractive proposition for privatisation.

So here we go again. I think that Ministers have become privatisation junkies. As they stumble from crisis to crisis, beating the retreat towards the general election, they scorch the earth as they go. They are completely in the hands of the ideologues who are now running the show. They are appeasing the right; they are ignoring the view of 1 million floating voters, who perhaps more than any other group represent middle England.

The Conservative party, that once formidable vote-gathering machine, is now incapable of addressing the concerns of the British people. Its unpopularity is richly deserved. For those who have created so much job insecurity for others, there is some justice in the fact that perhaps the most insecure jobs of all are those of the Prime Minister and those on the Government Benches. I therefore urge my right hon. and hon. Friends to oppose the order in the Lobby.

10.48 pm

Sir Edward Heath (Old Bexley and Sidcup): The debate gives me the opportunity to say a few words that I have long wanted to say about the position of the civil service.

I must immediately declare an interest that I had long before Nolan decided to treat us all as criminals. When I left the Army, in 1946, I decided to enter the civil service

[Sir Edward Heath]

if possible. I therefore sat the administrative examination, and I have always been rather proud of the fact that I came top of the whole administrative service. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I am glad to know that my party appreciates it—it has taken 50 years, but it is nevertheless very gratifying.

I entered the civil service, and I was there for a year. I found that I could not get anything done, so I left and entered politics. I will not make a comparison between the two—that might be invidious—but, at that time, those of us who had been at university before the war regarded it as one of our main objectives to get into the administrative civil service because it was so highly respected, in this country and elsewhere. The civil service was certainly the envy of the whole of the English-speaking world, and of what were then the colonies.

What is the position today? The morale of the civil service has never been lower—never. One knows that full well from all one's contacts with the civil service. Is that healthy? Of course not. Therefore, one should pay attention to every possible factor that affects the civil service.

The right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster) rightly mentioned the political impact in our country at the moment. I am not putting it in the forefront of the argument, but it is a very important political factor for my constituency and others like it on the outer ring of London. It certainly will not help the Government to recover from the position in which they found themselves last Thursday.

In the past 15 years, too many people have tried to gain credit by discrediting the civil service; the only thing they have done is to decry the number of people in the civil service and claim great victories when the number went down. That was mostly bogus, because people were moved out of the civil service into other organisations that do the same job. The number was not greatly diminished, but great uncertainty in the civil service was produced. The exercise has therefore achieved nothing.

The hard facts of the case are that, if one wants to reduce numbers in the civil service, one must provide not some outside organisation, but an alternative means of tackling the problems that the service must handle every day. That means that one must have some mechanisation—newer developments in equipment and so on—to enable fewer people to do the job. At the moment, jobs are simply not being done.

I do not know the experience of other right hon. and hon. Members, but I have done an analysis of the first three months of this year, and time and again I have waited two months before receiving a letter from a Minister in response to a constituent's problem. I have now received such a letter after a wait of three months. If I may say so very humbly, if it takes two or three months to answer my letters, I do not know how long it is taking to answer those of other hon. Members. That is the situation the Government have to deal with, and it is another reason why our voters are entirely disillusioned with the service that Government and Ministers give them regarding their day-to-day problems.

The issue of pensions is crucial for civil servants. Again we are told, "Privatise it!" Of course there has been a major field for privatisation, but we must acknowledge that the position regarding the services is quite different, and dogma to the effect that they should be privatised is causing much trouble.

The job—the intention—of privatisation is not to provide a service but to make profit. In the process, privatisation may provide a service for some, but not all. That is the automatic result of any economic analysis. When it comes to pensions, private providers are not interested in providing a service: like any insurance company, they are interested in how they will make money for their shareholders. That condemnation may be levelled at all moves by my hon. Friend and by the Government to allow services to be provided by those who are not service providers. Such people simply seek to make money for their shareholders.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): You must be joking—weren't you a Conservative?

Sir Edward Heath: If my hon. Friend denies that fact, he is not a sound Conservative economist. I am prepared to argue that point. In pursuing the privatisation path, particularly regarding civil service arrangements, my hon. Friend the Minister is making a grave mistake.

I hope that the Government will reconsider their attitude and distinguish between the privatisation sphere and the sphere of services that can be provided only by organisations such as the present civil service. I know that my hon. Friend will not take any notice of my suggestion, and I am sorry that I cannot stay to listen to his refusal to do so, but I am quite prepared to read his comments in *Hansard* tomorrow and see on what grounds he repudiates my request.

I believe that it is a basic consideration. The Government must decide to draw the line and stop carrying on in a dogmatic manner, believing that whatever they do in that sphere is correct. The public have come soundly to the conclusion that it is not correct, which is why the Government are suffering in many ways—including this way.

10.56 pm

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), not least because he echoes the comments that we on these Benches have made for much of the Government's tenure of office. I am delighted to welcome him to our point of view. Given that the Government's majority has been reduced to one, I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will take the opportunity—which he obviously did not have in the civil service—to do something really dramatic and join us in the Lobby to defeat the Government tonight. I look forward to that moment with considerable pleasure.

The Liberal Democrats are not dogmatically opposed to market testing or to contracting out—we have never said that and we never shall. On the contrary, we believe that such matters should be considered individually on their merits. Benefits may be derived from market testing or from contracting out. We may benefit from outside expertise, knowledge and new ideas or opportunities. The competitive process may lead to an increase in the number of new choices which may lead, in turn, to a better solution, but that is not an inevitable consequence and

there are points to be made on the other side of the argument. I believe that, in this case, the points against outweigh any advantages that may be gained.

The first point that we must make is that administration of a pension fund is not a negligible matter, as the Minister seemed to imply in at least part of his speech. We are talking about those who will not be the investors in pension funds, but that does not diminish the importance of their work—particularly for the pensioners concerned. The fact that a pensioner may be paid the right sum, but paid it three months late due to an administrative error, is crucial for that pensioner. For example, a pension might be paid into the wrong bank account and the money might not reach its rightful recipient for some time. Good administration of a pension fund is just as important as good investment or getting the sums right.

The Minister skated lightly over the problem of confidentiality which is immensely important to some civil servants. Those who work in the Ministry of Defence or the Foreign and Commonwealth Office are obvious examples of civil servants who may not wish their private affairs, their addresses and their financial details to become public knowledge. Of course there is some risk of that, and those people fear that there will be a greater likelihood that their affairs will be more widely known, if their pension fund is administered by a private contractor instead of a civil service organisation.

Mr. Nigel Jones (Cheltenham): Can my hon. Friend think of any way in which my constituents who work at GCHQ could benefit from the order and protect the confidentiality of their pension arrangements?

Mr. Rendel: No, indeed. My hon. Friend has raised an important point. His constituents are at the heart of the problem of confidentiality because of the work in which they are involved and the risks that they will take if their whereabouts or personal details become known in the private sector.

Moreover, the Government have failed to dispel the suspicion that the process has been driven by a dogmatic desire to extend the amount of private involvement in the public sector. In his opening remarks, the Minister said that steps would be taken to maintain confidentiality, but that was all he said about it. I do not consider that a sufficient guarantee that confidentiality will be properly maintained.

There is a further concern that the Government seem to be driven by dogma rather than by a rational consideration of what is needed. The Government may be moving towards a greater break-up of public service pension funds than they have so far admitted.

The current service is well received by civil servants and those who have recently retired. Recent enhancements, some of which have been described, have been made to the current service. The efficiency scrutiny that has been mentioned accepts that, for a very large number of employees and pensioners, in-house administration is almost always more efficient and cost-effective than going to an outside contractor. That is almost common sense, so it is difficult to see why the Government do not accept it.

The most important objection to what the Government are doing brings me back to the point made by the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup. Civil service morale is so low that to give it a further blow, as the Government are doing tonight, is no way to proceed.

The main reason why the measure will be a further blow to civil service morale is the lack of consultation with those covered by the scheme. Although those involved may have been formally consulted, their views were not taken into account and that makes the consultation rather superficial. The Government have talked about the need for private sector businesses to improve communication with their employees. That is an important consideration for all businesses, following numerous examples of bad practice, yet the Government are ignoring their own advice and the right of current and former civil servants to have a real say in the administration of their pension scheme. If it is right that that should happen in the private sector, it must be even more right that it should happen in the public sector.

Because the Government are not governed by company law, they are better able to take into account the real needs and desires of former and current employees rather than simply to take into account the bottom line. What they are doing tonight is an example of bad government. Civil servants have had to put up with enough in recent years, working in an increasingly tense public sector with falling morale. To ignore further their views, as the Government threaten to do tonight, will make it likely that their morale will fall still further. That will have a damaging impact on the conduct of government. The Government should not get the order through the House tonight.

11.4 pm

Mr. Willetts: The right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster) complained about insecurity in the civil service, then went about stirring up insecurity with a series of lurid claims about the future of the civil service pension scheme that bear no relationship to reality. The right hon. Gentleman accused us of having a plan to break up and destroy the principal scheme, but that is simply not the case. We are talking simply about creating the opportunity for competitive tendering for the administration of the scheme, which will have no effect on benefits.

The proposal is, in the best sense of the word, permissive. It simply creates a new opportunity for Departments to invite the private sector to tender for the business of administering civil service schemes—something from which they are stopped by law from doing. We are removing that obstacle.

The right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland made great play of the efficiency scrutiny. I am perfectly willing to accept all the quotes that the right hon. Gentleman gave, provided that he will accept the point made at the beginning of the report:

"The scrutiny has established that there is a range of services which the private sector could offer with advantage, including pensions administration. It recommends that market testing should proceed as soon as the legal position has been resolved."

We are now implementing that proposal.

The right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland asked why we are not balloting members. I am not aware of any precedent for balloting members of any pension scheme, public or private, on its administrative arrangements—that would be an extraordinary and unprecedented step.

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath) for remaining in his place for the remainder of the debate. He raised important questions about the civil service as a whole. My right hon. Friend spoke as a former civil servant; I shall reply to him as a former civil servant myself.

[Mr. Willetts]

I was in Oxford last Friday, and I asked the dons whether they remembered the days—which I am sure my right hon. Friend remembers—when undergraduates used to sit in serried ranks to take the civil service entrance examination. I asked whether undergraduates still did so, and the answer was an unambiguous yes. Undergraduates are still trying to enter a career in the civil service because of the job satisfaction that the service offers, enhanced by our reforms which aim to give more managerial responsibility and discretion to civil servants, who should not suffer under the elaborate hierarchies under which the service operated in the past.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup feared bogus reductions in civil service staff numbers. Of course we must be wary of bogus reductions, but I assure my right hon. Friend that the reduction from 732,000 staff in 1979 to fewer than 500,000 today has been achieved not by statistical manipulation but by precisely the sort of changes that my right hon. Friend recommended. One example is the use of automation in fundamentally improving the way in which services are delivered.

Mr. Derek Foster: If the situation is as the Minister says, why did the ombudsman draw particular attention in his latest report to the deterioration in the quality of service given and make the point that it was due to staff reductions? The ombudsman stated that staff numbers have so reduced that the service is not able to give the same quality of service, and he is receiving far more complaints.

Mr. Willetts: I have studied the ombudsman's latest report carefully and I cannot find in it evidence to sustain the assertion that appeared in the press notice. We take careful notice of anything that the ombudsman says, as he is an officer serving the House, but I do not accept the assumption that the way to measure the quality of output is by measuring the input. The challenge for the private sector is to improve the quality of service that it offers customers while not spending more on overheads and running costs. We should expect the same of the public service.

Mr. Rowe: I am sure that my hon. Friend would remove a miasma of anxiety if he were able to confirm that, if a private sector provider won the contract and made a horlicks of it in some way, the cost of making that mistake would not fall on the scheme but on the company providing the administration.

Mr. Willetts: I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that he seeks. Nothing in the proposals will in any way affect the benefits payable to civil servants. That leads me to the short speech from the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel).

Mr. Rendel: If what I gather is nowadays described as a horlicks were made by the company concerned, that might include problems such as I mentioned in which somebody was paid very late. Does the Minister agree that late payment would affect the pensioner concerned?

Mr. Willetts: The hon. Gentleman, while he has protested great concern about this subject, does not seem to understand the basic elementary points of what we propose. The proposals cover the administration of the scheme for current civil servants. That has nothing to do with the payment of pensions to former civil servants. The proposals in the order concern entirely the administration of the scheme for current civil servants and are nothing to do with Paymaster's function of paying out benefits and pensions to retired civil servants.

On the basis of the clarification that I have been able to offer tonight—in particular, the fundamental assurance that the order contains no change to civil servants' pension rights—I invite the House to approve the order.

11.11 pm

Dr. John Marek (Wrexham): I am sorry to speak now, but I honestly thought that one or two Conservative Members would rise to support the Minister. Alas, I fear that that is not the case. The right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), in a well-meaning way, tried to put the Government back on the rails. I agreed completely with the right hon. Gentleman because he got to the nub of the problem. I dissent from the conclusion that he drew, because he was trying to guide the Conservative party to a line that would enable it to remain in office. As an Opposition Member, I cannot agree with that, but if the Government insist on continuing with their dogma—the word has been used on several occasions by different right hon. and hon. Members—it is likely that they will be turfed out at the next general election, whenever they have enough courage to call one.

The issue centres on providing service rather than profits. I concur with the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup because, for a substantive reply from some Government Departments—not all—I now have to wait not two or three months, except on rare occasions, but two, three or four weeks. In the Department of Social Security, for example, the time that civil servants have to give care to their answers and to work out the arithmetic about individual claimants is minimal, the result of which is that the number of mistakes made in that Department multiplies from day to day. That is a sorry state of affairs. The country should expect accuracy and efficiency from civil servants, and they should reply to letters in a reasonable time.

It is all very well having charters for this and charters for that, but if replies are not accurate, if the figures are wrong, and constituents have to go to their Members of Parliament, who then have to write again to the social security department or to the Secretary of State for Social Security, that is not good for the country or for my constituents, because of the extra work and administration.

That is the nub of the problem. I expect the civil service to be staffed sufficiently to be able to produce accurate, proper and quick answers to my constituents' questions. I fear that, during the past six or seven years, with cuts—another per cent. here, or another per cent. there—they have not been receiving that service.

The Minister made a glib speech. I hope that he will not mind my saying so—I do not mean this in any rude way—but he did not address the questions that the proposal raises. He talked about the civil service scheme and the fact that the benefits that civil servants receive would not be affected, regardless of whether the scheme was hived off to the private sector for administration

purposes. What he did not talk about—not once—was the effect that it would have on the taxpayer, the ordinary member who pays taxes in the United Kingdom.

If the scheme was hived off to the private sector and a mess—I do not want to use the word horlicks—of the scheme was made, and if the civil servants did not lose any of the pension entitlements as, rightly, they should not, the country would have to foot the bill. I am not sure that the computing system for the scheme is ready yet—there are questions about whether it is in place.

If the scheme were to be hived off, is the advantage anything other than saving money? If it is, when the market testing goes ahead, will the Minister set parameters that at least assure some hon. Members that standards of service will be met? The Minister did not mention that. He may not have wanted to. Some standards of service could be identified to ensure that the civil service pensioner will receive the same service as now, when the scheme is being administered by the civil service. I am talking, for example, about acknowledgements of a pensioner's letter by return of post, about substantive replies being given within two or three weeks and, more important, some statistics about the accuracy and helpfulness of those replies.

The simple straightforward question, which addresses directly the problem raised by the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup, is whether there is a possibility of marrying the desire of a private company to make profits for its shareholders with the ability to provide standards of service that can be guaranteed and in which civil service pensioners can have confidence when the specifications for the market testing are produced. I do not know. I rather doubt it. This is a matter of service as opposed to profit. Administration of the scheme should be left in the hands of those who have administered it extremely well over the past decades. That is an important question and I am sorry that the Minister has not answered it.

I come now to the second point—*[Interruption.]* Conservative Members are fed up with me. *[Interruption.]* Some hon. Members are not even in the Chamber. They should keep quiet or move into the Chamber, because that is the way in which we do things in the House of Commons. Half a million civil servants are interested in who will administer their pension scheme. It is a great pity—I see that my own Whip is now telling me to wind up my speech, but I shall make an important point before I do. It will not take long. If hon. Members pay attention, I hope that they will learn something, or at least have something to think about.

My second point is straightforward but important. In the private sector, there has recently been a spate of conversions of mutual societies to banks and so forth. People are balloted before any change is made in their mortgage arrangements and, following Maxwell, before any change has been made in the administration of private sector pensions, all pensioners have been balloted on whether they agree with the change.

My challenge to the Minister is very simple: is he prepared to ballot civil servants after the changes have been agreed, or recommended, to find out whether those who will be affected accept the changes? That is a straightforward, simple question. Unfortunately, the Minister has not answered it. There are two points there—*[Interruption.]* I am asked what the third point is, but there is no third point. We must get on.

First, there is the question of service. Can the Minister assure the House that standards of service will be set if the administration passes to the private sector? Secondly, will he have the guts, the decency and the respect for civil servants to ballot them before the provisions are enacted?

Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 261, Noes 240.

Division No. 121] **[11.21 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(East Surrey)*
Aitken, Rt Hon Jonathan
Alexander, Richard
Alison, Rt Hon Michael *(Selby)*
Allason, Rupert *(Torbay)*
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, James
Arnold, Jacques *(Gravesham)*
Atkins, Rt Hon Robert
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Nicholas *(North Dorset)*
Baldry, Tony
Banks, Matthew *(Southport)*
Banks, Robert *(Harrogate)*
Batiste, Spencer
Bendall, Vivian
Beresford, Sir Paul
Booth, Hartley
Boswell, Tim
Bowis, John
Boyson, Rt Hon Sir Rhodes
Brandreth, Gyles
Brazier, Julian
Bright, Sir Graham
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Brown, M *(Brigg & C'thorpes)*
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(South Dorset)*
Budgen, Nicholas
Burns, Simon
Burt, Alistair
Butcher, John
Butler, Peter
Butterfill, John
Carlisle, John *(Luton North)*
Carlisle, Sir Kenneth *(Lincoln)*
Carrington, Matthew
Carttiss, Michael
Cash, William
Channon, Rt Hon Paul
Chapman, Sir Sydney
Churchill, Mr
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rochford)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Ru'cliff)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coe, Sebastian
Colvin, Michael
Congdon, David
Conway, Derek
Coombs, Anthony *(Wyre For'st)*
Coombs, Simon *(Swindon)*
Couchman, James
Cran, James
Currie, Mrs Edwina *(S D'by'ire)*
Curry, David *(Skipton & Ripon)*
Davies, Quentin *(Stamford)*
Day, Stephen
Deva, Nirj Joseph
Dicks, Terry
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James
Dover, Den
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Dunn, Bob
Durant, Sir Anthony
Elletson, Harold
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, David *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Evans, Jonathan *(Brecon)*
Evans, Nigel *(Ribble Valley)*
Evans, Roger *(Monmouth)*
Evennett, David
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fenner, Dame Peggy
Field, Barry *(Isle of Wight)*
Forman, Nigel
Forth, Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Rt Hon Sir Marcus *(Shipley)*
Freeman, Rt Hon Roger
French, Douglas
Fry, Sir Peter
Gale, Roger
Gallie, Phil
Gardiner, Sir George
Garnier, Edward
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Alastair
Goodson-Wickes, Dr Charles
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Grant, Sir A *(SW Cambs)*
Greenway, Harry *(Ealing N)*
Greenway, John *(Ryedale)*
Griffiths, Peter *(Portsmouth, N)*
Grylls, Sir Michael
Gummer, Rt Hon John Selwyn
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archibald
Hamilton, Neil *(Tatton)*
Hampson, Dr Keith
Hanley, Rt Hon Jeremy
Hannam, Sir John
Hargreaves, Andrew
Haselhurst, Sir Alan
Hawkins, Nick
Hawksley, Warren
Hayes, Jerry
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hendry, Charles
Higgins, Rt Hon Sir Terence
Hill, James *(Southampton Test)*
Horam, John
Hordern, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howell, Rt Hon David *(G'dford)*
Howell, Sir Ralph *(N Norfolk)*
Hughes, Robert G *(Harrow W)*
Hunt, Rt Hon David *(Wirral W)*
Hunt, Sir John *(Ravensbourne)*
Hunter, Andrew
Hurd, Rt Hon Douglas
Jack, Michael

Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Jessel, Toby
Johnson Smith, Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Gwilym *(Cardiff N)*
Jones, Robert B *(W Hertfdshr)*
Kellett-Bowman, Dame Elaine
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom
Kirkhope, Timothy
Knapman, Roger
Knight, Mrs Angela *(Erewash)*
Knight, Rt Hon Greg *(Derby N)*
Knight, Dame Jill *(Bir'm E'st'n)*
Knox, Sir David
Kynoch, George *(Kincardine)*
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamont, Rt Hon Norman
Lang, Rt Hon Ian
Lawrence, Sir Ivan
Legg, Barry
Leigh, Edward
Lennox-Boyd, Sir Mark
Lester, Sir James *(Broxtowe)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Lord, Michael
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maitland, Lady Olga
Malone, Gerald
Mans, Keith
Marland, Paul
Marshall, Sir Michael *(Arundel)*
Martin, David *(Portsmouth S)*
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
Mayhew, Rt Hon Sir Patrick
Merchant, Piers
Mills, Iain
Mitchell, Andrew *(Gedling)*
Mitchell, Sir David *(NW Hants)*
Monro, Rt Hon Sir Hector
Montgomery, Sir Fergus
Neubert, Sir Michael
Newton, Rt Hon Tony
Nicholls, Patrick
Nicholson, David *(Taunton)*
Norris, Steve
Oppenheim, Phillip
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Patnick, Sir Irvine
Patten, Rt Hon John
Pattie, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Pawsey, James
Porter, David *(Waveney)*
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Rathbone, Tim
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Renton, Rt Hon Tim
Richards, Rod
Riddick, Graham
Rifkind, Rt Hon Malcolm
Robathan, Andrew
Roberts, Rt Hon Sir Wyn
Robertson, Raymond *(Ab'd'n S)*
Robinson, Mark *(Somerton)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Mid Kent)*
Sainsbury, Rt Hon Sir Timothy
Scott, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
Shaw, David *(Dover)*
Shaw, Sir Giles *(Pudsey)*
Shephard, Rt Hon Gillian
Shepherd, Sir Colin *(Hereford)*
Shepherd, Richard *(Aldridge)*
Shersby, Sir Michael
Skeet, Sir Trevor
Smith, Tim *(Beaconsfield)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spencer, Sir Derek
Spicer, Sir James *(W Dorset)*
Spicer, Sir Michael *(S Worcs)*
Spink, Dr Robert
Sproat, Iain
Squire, Robin *(Hornchurch)*
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Stephen, Michael
Stern, Michael
Stewart, Allan
Streeter, Gary
Sumberg, David
Sweeney, Walter
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strgfd)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy *(Southend, E)*
Thomason, Roy
Thompson, Sir Donald *(C'er V)*
Thompson, Patrick *(Norwich N)*
Townend, John *(Bridlington)*
Townsend, Cyril D *(Bexl'yh'th)*
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Trotter, Neville
Vaughan, Sir Gerard
Viggers, Peter
Waldegrave, Rt Hon William
Walden, George
Waller, Gary
Ward, John
Wardle, Charles *(Bexhill)*
Waterson, Nigel
Watts, John
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Ray
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Ann
Wiggin, Sir Jerry
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macc'fld)*
Wolfson, Mark
Wood, Timothy
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Dr. Liam Fox and
Mr. Michael Bates.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Alton, David
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Ms Janet *(Ros'dale)*
Armstrong, Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Banks, Tony *(Newham NW)*
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beckett, Rt Hon Margaret
Bennett, Andrew F
Bermingham, Gerald
Betts, Clive
Blunkett, David
Boateng, Paul
Bradley, Keith
Brown, N *(N'c'tle upon Tyne E)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burden, Richard
Byers, Stephen
Cabom, Richard
Callaghan, Jim
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(Fife NE)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Carlile, Alexander *(Montgomery)*
Chisholm, Malcolm
Church, Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr David *(South Shields)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tom *(Monklands W)*
Clelland, David
Coffey, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Covy SE)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Alistair
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Bryan *(Oldham C'tral)*
Davies, Chris *(L'Boro & S'worth)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Denham, John
Dewar, Donald
Dixon, Don
Dobson, Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eastham, Ken
Etherington, Bill
Evans, John *(St Helens N)*
Fatchett, Derek
Faulds, Andrew
Field, Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foulkes, George
Fraser, John
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Garrett, John
George, Bruce
Gerrard, Neil
Gilbert, Rt Hon Dr John
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Golding, Mrs Llin
Graham, Thomas
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Ms Harriet
Harvey, Nick
Hattersley, Rt Hon Roy
Henderson, Doug
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hoey, Kate
Hogg, Norman *(Cumbernauld)*
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Howarth, Alan *(Strat'rd-on-A)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley North)*
Howells, Dr Kim *(Pontypridd)*
Hoyle, Doug
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Robert *(Aberdeen N)*
Hughes, Roy *(Newport E)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark)*
Hutton, John
Ilsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Glenda *(H'stead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Shef'ld, H)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian *(SE Staff)*
Johnston, Sir Russell
Jones, Barry *(Alyn and D'side)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Lynne *(B'ham S O)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd, SW)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Tessa
Keen, Alan
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross,C&S)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kirkwood, Archy
Litherland, Robert
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Stretford)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lynne, Ms Liz
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCartney, Ian
McFall, John
McKelvey, William
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
McMaster, Gordon
McNamara, Kevin
MacShane, Denis
Madden, Max
Maddock, Diana
Mandelson, Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester, S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Michael
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffield Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*

Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Rhodri
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Paul
O'Brien, Mike *(N W'kshire)*
O'Brien, William *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Orme, Rt Hon Stanley
Parry, Robert
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Bridget *(Lew'm E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Quin, Ms Joyce
Radice, Giles
Randall, Stuart
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Dr John
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Co'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruddock, Joan
Salmond, Alex
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shore, Rt Hon Peter
Short, Clare
Simpson, Alan
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Chris *(Isl'ton S & F'sbury)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spearing, Nigel
Spellar, John
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stott, Roger
Strang, Dr. Gavin
Straw, Jack
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis
Tyler, Paul
Walley, Joan
Wardell, Gareth *(Gower)*
Wareing, Robert N
Watson, Mike
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Sw'n W)*
Williams, Alan W *(Carmarthen)*
Worthington, Tony
Wray, Jimmy
Wright, Dr Tony
Young, David *(Bolton South East)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Joe Benton and
Mrs. Jane Kennedy.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Contracting Out (Administration of Civil Service Pension Schemes) Order 1996, which was laid before this House on 25th March, be approved.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Wednesday 15th May, Standing Order No. 10 (Wednesday sittings) shall have effect with the following variations: in paragraph (1) in place of the words 'two o'clock' shall be inserted 'half-past ten o'clock and between one o'clock and two o'clock'; in place of paragraph (5) shall be inserted 'Not more than two subjects shall be raised between half-past nine o'clock and half-past ten o'clock and not more than two subjects shall be raised between one o'clock and two o'clock'; and the Speaker shall suspend the sitting on that day between half-past ten o'clock and one o'clock.—*[Mr. McLoughlin.]*

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Ordered,

That Mr. Michael Fabricant be discharged from the National Heritage Committee and Sir Mark Lennox-Boyd be added to the Committee.—*[Sir Fergus Montgomery, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.]*

Hospital and Dental Services (Southampton)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. McLoughlin.]*

11.35 pm

Mr. John Denham (Southampton, Itchen): I am grateful, at this late hour, for this debate, because in the past year a series of problems in the hospital and dental services in Southampton and South West Hampshire health authority area has caused mounting concern about the future of our local NHS. I cannot mention all the problems tonight but I hope that I can raise enough to make the Minister realise that they are not minor or isolated problems but are part of a pattern that is making people in Southampton ask where their health service is going. It is a pattern of cuts in vital services—a two-tier health service in which who pays for care is more important than how ill people are.

These examples are a case study of the problems inherent in the Government's management of the national health service. and especially in their health market. I shall deal briefly with the situation in the Southampton University Hospitals NHS trust and the Southampton and South West Hampshire health authority, and touch on the state of dental services in that health authority area.

I have three points at the outset. I am not trying to suggest that no one is treated well in the local hospital service or that no one is looked after or gets better in Southampton hospitals—of course many people receive a high standard of care every day—but I will say unambiguously that that quality of care is now under serious threat. I do not criticise the staff at any level. I have no doubt that all the people involved in the hospital services and the health authority are working as hard as they can, often against the odds and under considerable pressure. I recognise the openness with which the Southampton University Hospitals NHS trust and the health authority have responded to my inquiries and requests for information. It is perhaps true, in part, that that makes it easier to document the problems we face in Southampton, but that is no bad thing.

The background to the current problems is the trust's financial crisis. It faces an £11 million shortfall in the current financial year, but the financial pressures have been building for some time. I shall give some examples. Fred Woolley house, a much-loved national health service convalescent home, was closed for a period up to April this year to save money. It has been temporarily reopened, but the trust makes little secret of its desire to close it permanently. It fills a much-needed role in the local health service. It offers recuperative care, often for people who have undergone major traumatic surgery. It is a vital bridge between hospital care and a return to a life at home. There is a local campaign to save Fred's, and I give it my full support.

If that service goes, we all know what will happen. Some people will be discharged to their own homes too early, increasing the pressures on families and general practitioners. Some will, inevitably, return to hospital.

I visited the accident and emergency unit at the general hospital recently. Again, I was impressed by much of what I saw, but it was emphasised to me how many of the elderly people admitted as emergencies in late

[Mr. John Denham]

December and January—at a time when such admissions hit the national headlines throughout the country—had been discharged from hospital prematurely.

The stress on GPs is building up. One local GP wrote to me this week:

"There is an overall increase in our workload, much of which is driven by the desire of the hospital trust to reduce its costs by passing work without accompanying resources to primary care."

Needless to say, the financial crisis leaves resources and facilities unused. A ward in the Tom Rudd unit at Moorgreen hospital, which could be providing rehabilitative care, lies empty. Again, the result will be early readmissions to hospital, a new burden on families to care or admission to a residential care home with perhaps another home sold to pay the costs.

On 29 April, following a similar move last year, the health authority wrote to GPs further restricting their ability to make extra contractual referrals. Once again, the GP's ability to refer patients to the most appropriate provider of care has been restricted.

We hear a lot about funding for the national health service from the Government, but that letter from the health authority to GPs make it clear that

"The financial difficulties facing the NHS in the coming year are probably more severe than at any time since the reforms were implemented."

Does the Minister agree with the health authority and that statement? If not, why does he think that it is wrong when that view is shared throughout the local health service?

The ability of the Southampton University Hospitals trust to meet the needs of children who need emergency care is also being restricted. As *The Southern Daily Echo* reported last December:

"Sick children needing emergency treatment are regularly diverted to hospitals in Poole and Portsmouth, while eight paediatric beds are lying empty and unused at the city's General Hospital."

Apparently, children had been diverted to other hospitals at least twice a month from the beginning of that financial year. All too often, we have had reports of mothers and newly born babies being sent from hospital to hospital across the south in the search for intensive care cots.

Care of the terminally ill has been yet another cause for concern. Dr Roger Ryall, clinical director of cancer care for the trust, spoke of his fears when faced with demands to make a cut of £800,000 in his budget and, in particular, on the impact that that will have on the terminally ill. He is quoted as saying:

"If we are forced to make these cuts, what will happen is that we will be much less able to buy time for people.

There are two categories of treatment—a lot of patients can be cured now and live a long time. We have to protect services for those people.

Where we will not be able to give such a comprehensive service is for people for whom we buy time—patients who know from the day they arrive we cannot cure because it is too extensive."

It is indeed alarming and appalling that senior clinicians are forced to talk publicly about reducing the level of care offered to the terminally ill.

Dr. Ryall's comments are those of one clinician faced with the impact of cuts on the services that he is trying to provide, but we can have little doubt that all his colleagues feel much the same about their areas of duty and responsibility.

At present, the trust is in the process of shedding the equivalent of more than 370 full-time jobs. The bulk of those will fall directly in areas of front-line patient care. More than 350 care staff will go from the clinical directorate, about 18 from hospital services such as pathology and one from management. Is that not depressingly familiar in a national health service that,since 1989, has had 50,000 fewer front-line staff and 18,000 more managers? Those running the trust and the health authority make it quite clear to me that the growth in administrative and management jobs is a direct result of the internal health market. The billing for care, the need to resolve disputes about bills that have been sent out and many other activities all eat into the resources available for front-line care.

At this point, the Minister may say that I have simply given a list of cuts, and that he hears this story all day, long. However, I want to emphasise not only the damaging nature of the cuts but what they mean for the way in which the health service in Southampton is being twisted and distorted to meet the needs and demands of the health market forced on to the health service locally.

On top of the impact of the cuts—alarming as they are—is the reinforcement of a symptom that has become all too common in the hospital service in Southampton. I refer to the development of a clear, unambiguous two-tier system—a service in which what care one receives and, in particular when one receives it, is governed not by how ill one is but by where one lives and who is paying for care. We witnessed that locally last year.

I am disappointed that he is not answering this debate, but the hon. Member for Winchester (Mr. Malone)—our local Health Minister, if I may call him that—was made well aware of one particular problem last October: the cancellation of non-urgent orthopaedic operations. He will remember being challenged by a Mr. Bridle when he visited Southampton last year. Mr. Bridle was just one of many patients whose expensive operations were put on hold. In that case, as in others, operations were prioritised, not according to clinical need but according to cost. That is just one example of cost pressures overruling clinical need.

From last October, routine gastroscopy services were withdrawn from the patients of non-fundholding GPs, although the services available to fundholding GPs were not similarly affected. Under recent contracts, heart patients living in Southampton face waits of up to twice as long for treatment at the city's general hospital as patients with the same condition in Portsmouth and Bournemouth. Bournemouth patients coming to Southampton face a maximum delay of four months; Portsmouth patients coming to Southampton face a maximum delay of six months; but Southampton patients in their own local hospital face a wait of up to nine months.

It is simply unfair and unjust that people with the same conditions and the same needs, whose wait for surgery imposes the same limits on their lives and activities, and who suffer the same fears and anxieties, wait for different lengths of time for the same treatment by the same doctors in the same wards of the same hospital. Why does this happen? It happens as a direct result of the workings of the internal market. These effects are not endemic across the country, but they are felt with particular force in

Southampton because of the very size of the Southampton University Hospitals trust in relation to the main purchasers.

The local health authority purchases only about half of the care provided by the Southampton hospitals. That means that when the major local hospital trust runs into financial problems, it turns to the health authority for assistance. That in turn means that all the burden of bailing out the hospital falls on one purchaser, and in particular on the patients whose care is being bought by the health authority. In effect, the trust looks to half its patients to carry the costs of all its financial problems. That is precisely what the Southampton University Hospitals trust has tried to do.

The trust has a shortfall of £11 million. It said that it would make £5 million worth of savings itself, and I have listed some of the consequences of the cuts involved. It then turned to the Southampton and South West Hampshire health authority with a request for the other £6 million.

The internal market means that smaller purchasers, fundholders, other health authorities and those with the greatest freedom to go elsewhere can continue to demand the higher level of service. The health authority is trapped. If it demands the same level of service for its patients as other purchasers, it can bankrupt the trust and close the hospital, but that "nuclear option" is clearly impossible. In practice, it could not find the £6 million that the trust was seeking. Instead, it had to settle for a second-rate service for its patients.

The health authority could not afford to bail out the hospital, so it had to agree to a reduction in the level of patient care. The health authority has agreed that waiting times should be allowed to double from the current maximum of nine months to a maximum of 18 months allowed by the patients charter. This applies only to health authority patients. As I have said, the health authority's waiting times are already longer than those of many other purchasers.

This decision has created a new type of patient in Southampton hospitals: the red star patient. There are 191,000 red star patients in the Southampton area who have their care paid for by the health authority. Admission staff and consultants have literally been told to stick a red star on their files. In relation to the red stars, a letter from the trust states:

"it would then be necessary to inform these patients in the clinic that they are effectively on the end of the waiting list."

I ask the Minister a simple question: is this what the Government's health reforms were intended to create—191,000 red star patients at the end of the waiting list, regardless of their needs or their condition? I declare an interest in this regard: I do not have a fundholding general practitioner, nor do my children—we are at risk of becoming red star patients, at the end of the queue.

In my constituency, 14 practices became fundholders as a multi-fund this year. That is not surprising, given what is happening. I know that, for many, this was a least-worst option and an agonising decision. This does not solve the problem. The more doctors who choose this option, the greater the pressure on the health authority when the trust is in financial crisis and the greater the pressure to produce a two-tier service as the number of purchasers fragments further.

I ask the Minister: how can he justify to 191,000 people, including me and my children, that they should be sent to the back of the queue? I do not put the blame on the health authority—it has a wide range of responsibilities. As it has made clear, if it had not agreed to these changes, emergency and urgent treatment would have suffered. There are other pressures: on services for elderly people, for people with mental health problems and for people with learning disabilities. The problem lies with the Government and their approach to managing health care.

Similar problems are apparent in the dental service in the Southampton and South West Hampshire health authority area. I have already sent the Secretary of State a copy of the report recently published by the local community health council. However, I should like to take a few moments to highlight its main conclusions. More children suffer from serious dental decay in my constituency than in almost any other part of the country. Dental illness is a serious problem for them.

In fairness, I welcome the recent appointment of a salaried dentist to serve the city centre parts of my constituency. However, NHS dentistry is becoming more and more difficult to obtain in my constituency and in the wider health authority area. In some villages around Southampton, no NHS dental service is available. In Southampton, there is no dental practice able to accept NHS patients in Townhill Park. This is a direct consequence of the so-called knock-on effect. That practice has accepted NHS patients from Hedge End, outside the city, where there is no NHS service. However, this means that the practice has had to refuse new registrations from local people. As the number of NHS dentists reduces, so the scrabble to remain with the remaining practices intensifies. No emergency service is available in Bitterne, Bassett, Bitterne Manor, Bitterne Park and St. Denys.

Those who responded to the community health council expressed grave concern about dentists who require them to register as private patients to secure NHS care for their children. Many people who are receiving private dental treatment are doing so not from choice but because they are unable to find a local NHS dentist or to travel to their nearest NHS dentist. I have carried out two surveys of local dentists since I was elected. They confirm that more and more dentists are moving out of NHS care either entirely or with restrictions on their lists. Every time this happens, the pressures on the remaining NHS dentists grow.

I conclude by asking the Minister whether he recognises the growing pressures on NHS dentistry in my area. Does he accept that, in practice, a significant number of Southampton residents are unable to obtain NHS dental care? If he does, what does he intend to do about it?

The story of my local health service is now one of a service that is not available equally to everyone. That service does not offer care according to a person's need. It operates a hospital service according to which people wait longer if they have the wrong doctor or live in the wrong area. The local dental service is such that people may not be able to obtain NHS dentistry or will have to pay privately if their children are to get NHS care. I do not believe that the NHS in Southampton is safe in the Government's hands.

11.54 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Horam): I am glad to have the opportunity to respond to the Adjournment debate of the hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham).

First, I note that the hon. Gentleman acknowledged the excellent work done particularly by the Southampton University Hospitals NHS trust, working in partnership with local purchasers. The Government have honoured their manifesto pledge to increase health spending in real terms every year, and new spending plans announced in the Budget mean that total spending by the NHS in England has increased from £6.5 billion in 1978-79, to £34.7 billion this year. That is equivalent to a real-terms increase of 72 per cent. since 1978-79.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware of some of the implications of that funding for Southampton. For example, a new £10 million hospital development for elderly people was opened on the former Southampton Western hospital site in January. It will provide 104 beds. Secondly, three neurosurgical theatres are being built at Southampton General hospital, at cost of £6 million, and are due to open in the summer. Thirdly, that funding will allow for cardiac expansion, including extra ward and intensive care unit capacity at Southampton University Hospitals NHS trust, which will be ready in the autumn. Those three items of capital expenditure are being funded by the huge increase in the budget for the NHS.

At the end of last year, the vast majority of patients in Southampton—more than 98 per cent.—were seen within nine months, and only five people had been waiting for more than 12 months. The hon. Gentleman may be aware that the Southampton University Hospitals trust was the first university teaching trust in the United Kingdom to achieve the excellent nine month standard. I believe that the hon. Gentleman will agree that that achievement compares rather well with the patients charter standard of 18 months. Southampton is therefore succeeding in setting and achieving a much tighter and more challenging standard for its own population. Overall, general and acute sector episodes of care completed by the trust have increased by more than 20 per cent in the past three years—a quite remarkable achievement.

I acknowledge that that level of activity has caused some financial problems in the trust recently, but I am sure that the trust, the health authority and the NHS executive south and west regional office are currently discussing an agreed strategic approach to address that problem. It would therefore be inappropriate for me to comment in any detail on the issue now, but I understand that emergency and urgent work will be unaffected, although there may some slippage in waiting times as the financial problems are resolved.

The health authority will retain its standard of nine months' waiting time, but it recognises that it may have increasing difficulty in maintaining that standard. The health authority and the trust have a long and strong strategic relationship, and I am confident that they will be able to agree on a way forward.

Secondly, may I deal with the hon. Gentleman's points about two-tierism? As the internal market develops, fundholders are improving services for their patients and others are following their example. Having a range of purchasers—health authorities and GP fundholders—stimulates innovation and critical consideration of service delivery to the benefit of all patients. Joint guidance issued by the Department of Health and the profession in June 1991 clearly states that hospitals should not offer contracts to one purchaser to the disadvantage of patients of another. All emergencies are seen immediately, and all urgent cases that cannot be seen immediately are placed on a common waiting list.

The amount of hospital activity purchased will always depend to some extent on the skill of the purchaser. All purchasers need to learn from that and ensure that they place equally good elective contracts on behalf of the patients of non-fundholding GPs. Inevitably, when driving up standards, some improve before others. Our aim is to bring the quality of all services up to the standard of the best.

Thirdly, the hon. Gentleman spoke about dentistry in Southampton. We have a good record, which is demonstrated by the figures, which speak for themselves. For example, expenditure on the general dental service between 1978-79 and 1994-95 has grown by nearly 60 per cent. in real terms. In 1994-95, courses of adult treatment had increased by 7.6 million from a similar figure for 1979, and there had been a 33.7 million increase in adult examinations in the same period.

I am aware that, in parts of the Southampton area, there are currently no NHS adult services for new patients. I have seen the recent Southampton and South West Hampshire community health council report on dental health services in the area, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned, and I do take it seriously. I understand that the health authority has already responded to that report, and I know that the hon. Gentleman has sent a copy to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health, who will reply to him in due course.

The hon. Gentleman may wish to know that 59 per cent. of the adult population of Hampshire are registered with an NHS dentist. That compares favourably with the national average, which is less than that—57 per cent. The health authority runs a very efficient dental helpline service to assist patients with access to NHS dentists and to help unregistered patients in an emergency.

As the hon. Gentleman acknowledged, the health authority has already appointed one salaried dentist, in November 1995, in Southampton. I would not pretend that that addresses the whole problem, but I understand that the health authority intends to apply to my Department for a further five salaried posts to cover the areas where there is at present no NHS cover. In addition, there is an emergency dental service based at Southampton general hospital. The service has been increased from two half-day sessions per weekend to full-time sessions at weekends and on bank holidays. I understand that those may be extended to some weekday evening sessions, so the problem is being tackled locally.

It would be incomplete of me to cover the changes that we are introducing in the general dental service without mentioning the reforms that my hon. Friend the Minister for Health announced last year. The hon. Gentleman mentioned him, so I may bring him into the debate as well. That was a comprehensive package of across-the-board reforms, the product of extensive study and wide consultation following on from the 1994 Green

Paper, "Improving NHS Dentistry". We are working on the reforms with representatives of the dental profession, and I believe that they will deliver concrete improvements in general dental services and help the NHS to tackle the oral health challenges ahead as well as providing stability and security for dentists.

All that will provide a strong framework in which the general dental service can continue to develop throughout the country—in Southampton and elsewhere.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute past Twelve midnight.

House of Commons

Wednesday 8 May 1996

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Water Meters

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Streeter.]*

9.35 am

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this matter today. It is nearly three years since I first raised in the House the subject of pre-payment water meters. At that time, the level of water disconnections was high and there was an understandable public outcry at the growth that had taken place. I said at that time that I was worried that what became known as pre-payment water meters might herald a new era of water disconnection by the back door. Sadly, I think that I have been proved right about that, and public concern is growing about the operation of water pre-payment devices.

Perhaps I should start by explaining exactly what pre-payment water meters are, because they are called by different names in different places. The Office of Water Services, or Ofwat, calls them budget payment units or budget payment devices. In my area of Severn Trent, pre-payment water meters are referred to by a brand name—the water key. The names vary, but the functions remain essentially the same wherever they are used, with one significant difference, which I will describe later.

The pre-payment water meters are like the old coin-operated meters that were common some time ago for paying for gas and electricity and are still in operation in many parts of the country. They are a pay-as-you-go system, but instead of being operated by the insertion of a coin, the pre-payment water meter is an electronic device operated by a key, or sometimes a card. The customer has to have the key or card charged up, normally at a post office, and by the insertion of the key or card in the unit at home, water is received for the period that has been paid for. I understand that some of the other utility services are also moving towards electronic rather than coin-operated systems for pre-payment.

The way the pre-payment water meter works—like the traditional coin-operated gas and electricity meters—is that, if the customer cannot, or, for other reasons, does not, keep up payments and does not charge up the card or key, the water supply automatically cuts off. In many cases, there is a warning period, and sometimes an emergency supply may be supplied for seven days, but we must be clear about the fact that, if the key or the card is not charged up, the customer is disconnected.

Disconnection from any utility service is a serious matter, but the public health consequences involved with water are so serious that the implications of water disconnection are that much more severe. If families do not have a supply of water, they cannot have baths. They have no water to wash in and no water to cook with. The customers cannot even flush their toilets. That is why many of us—I am pleased to say that that includes all hon. Members on the Opposition Benches and a growing number of hon. Members on the Government side—want to outlaw water disconnections altogether.

That is also why existing legislation, inadequate though it is, in my view, lays down clear notice requirements on any water company that is contemplating disconnecting a domestic customer for non-payment. The customer has the right to dispute liability and have a court hearing before disconnection takes effect. Within 48 hours of disconnection—if it is anticipated that it will last for more than 24 hours—the water company must notify the local authority. That is because of the possible environmental health consequences of disconnection.

The pre-payment water meter drives a coach and horses through existing legislation by allowing what has been described as self-disconnection. In reality, it is not self-disconnection. It is the pre-payment meter that cuts off the water supply, not the customer. It is disconnection none the less. As that bypasses existing legislation, no fewer than 26 local authorities have signified their willingness to mount a legal challenge to the use of pre-payment meters. Those local authorities are not interested in establishing an obscure point of law for the sake of it. They are willing to present a legal challenge, however, because a growing number of people are having their water supply cut off.

Reports from Ofwat tell us that about 16,000 pre-payment water meters have been installed. They are mainly in the areas covered by Severn Trent Water, North West Water, Welsh Water and Wessex Water. There has been a startling increase in the number of hidden disconnections associated with these meters.

In Birmingham, for example, Severn Trent Water has pioneered the use of pre-payment meters. It is no accident that, as a result, Birmingham city council is leading the legal challenge to the installation of such meters. The council estimates that, in Birmingham alone, there have been no fewer than 2,489 disconnections associated with pre-payment meters. Those were the disconnections that had taken place by April. As it is estimated that only about 1,500 pre-payment meters have been installed in the Birmingham area, there is clearly a pretty staggering disconnection rate.

Those figures do not sit easily with Ofwat's press release yesterday, in which it applauded the fact, as it saw it, that there had been a 42 per cent. reduction in domestic disconnections in one year. Ofwat stated that only three out of every 10,000 households are having their water supply disconnected.

It is convenient for Ofwat and the water companies that disconnections by the operation of pre-payment water meters are not included in the statistics. However, the disconnections are still real for the families involved—and I mean families. When a disconnection takes place and a household runs out of water, it is not only the householder who has failed to pay his or her bill who is affected. It means, for example, that the children cannot have a bath. The elderly relative who lives upstairs will not be able to flush the toilet.

[Mr. Richard Burden]

Water disconnection affects the entire family. Whether disconnection takes place by the operation of a pre-payment meter or otherwise, it is still real, and the public health risks are still there.

I do not know what the Minister will say when he replies. I am hardly encouraged, however, by the replies that I received to written questions that I tabled last week. On 29 April, I was told that the Government had not yet obtained the figures setting out the number of pre-payment water devices that had been installed throughout the country. I was told that the Government did not collect figures centrally which would show how many customers had had their water supply interrupted through the use of such meters.

But the response of the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison), to one of my questions was interesting. As I have said, he told me that the figures were not collected, but he added:

"There is no disconnection of the water supply to the property as a result of the operation of a budget payment unit. The supply continues to be available and can be used as soon as the unit is recharged."—[*Official Report*, 29 April 1996; Vol. 276, c. *333*.]

Now we know. Apparently, it is not a disconnection, because the customer can have his supply restored if he pays up. Presumably, by that logic, there are no electricity, gas or telephone disconnections. If the customer pays up, he can always have the service restored.

It is a fascinating argument. Will it be used by the Government after the next election? Will they say, "We were not really defeated at the election, because, when another election comes along, if we secure more votes, it will not count that we were defeated earlier." It is logic of which Sir Humphrey Appleby would have been proud.

We know, however, that disconnection is real. We also know that Ministers are reluctant to admit that pre-payment meters disconnect, because they know that, as soon as they use the word "disconnection", there will be a public outcry. As soon as they use that word, the dubious legality of pre-payment devices will take centre stage.

We shall probably be told today that pre-payment meters are popular with customers. No doubt we shall be told that they are voluntary, and that no customer is forced to have such a meter. We shall probably be told also that Severn Trent in the midlands has conducted a MORI poll, the result of which reflected massive customer satisfaction with pre-payment meters. It is probable that we shall be told that the meters are not about disconnecting, but instead are an aid to budgeting. It will be claimed that they are a new form of easy payment terms.

I am all in favour of the easy payment schemes. I am in favour, too, of allowing customers, especially those on low incomes, to spread the payment of their water bills. It would not be a bad thing if the bills were rather smaller, but assuming that they remain at their present level, it is a good idea to allow customers to spread their payments. It is not necessary, however, to install a device that cuts people off from their water supply if they are to have easy payment terms.

I have criticised Severn Trent Water many times for its promotion of the water key or pre-payment meter. I compliment it, however, on introducing another scheme, which it has called the watercard. Perhaps the terminology is unfortunate, because I understand that there is a pre-payment device that is also called a watercard. The Severn Trent watercard is not a pre-payment meter. Instead, it is a smartcard that is issued to the customer, who can then take it to the post office and charge it up, as it were. He is able to pay as much or as little towards his bill as he wants. No device is installed in the home. The card simply records the amount that has been paid, in a very easy way.

I welcome the fact that Severn Trent Water is promoting its smartcard. I urge other companies to take up the scheme. I understand that a similar scheme is being operated by Dwr Cymru, and that is good. The scheme is an aid to budgeting. Machines that cut off customers from their water supply are not easy-payment schemes. Instead, they lead to disconnections by the back door.

We hear from water companies and from Ofwat that pre-payment meters are an aid to budgeting. When will they admit to the families that have had the devices installed that they cost more than other systems? It is an interesting aid to budgeting. It is an interesting easy payment scheme if it costs more to have such a system. In the Severn Trent area, each installation of a pre-payment meter costs the customer about £26. That could be about 10 to 15 per cent. of someone's water bill for a year. For the privilege of having a pre-payment meter, the customer is charged £26.

There is another catch in the operation of the vast majority of such meters. I said at the beginning of my speech that they differed in one significant respect from traditional gas and electricity meters. The difference is that the vast majority of water pre-payment meters are not volumetric. Normally, when the customer charges up his water key or other pre-payment device, that does not involve his buying a certain quantity of water; he is buying a certain amount of time during which he is connected to the water supply. His annual water charge is divided by the amount charged up on his card or key.

The catch is this. If the customer does not keep the card or key charged up, that will not alter his liability to pay his annual water bill. That means that, even if the customer is cut off, he will be charged for water that he is not receiving. That is a very strange aid to budgeting—a very strange easy payment scheme. The customer is told that the device will be helpful, but if he cannot keep up the payments, he is charged for water that he is not allowed to receive.

I would be interested to know how many of the customers who have apparently expressed great satisfaction with the operation of pre-payment meters were told in advance that, if they could not keep up their payments, their water supply would be cut off, but they would still be charged for it. I suspect that the answer is, not very many.

No doubt we shall be told that pre-payment meters do not have to operate on the basis of time; at the flick of a switch, they can become volumetric. We may be told that that would remove all the problems, but it would not. This debate is not about the hidden, creeping spread of compulsory water metering, about which there is just as much public concern, but no doubt that will feature in another debate later today. I do not want the use of pre-payment water meters to add to that spread.

So what is the problem with pre-payment water meters? We know that 26 local authorities are mounting a legal challenge. We know that today, in Liverpool, local authorities, health professionals, tenants' groups and others are gathering to mount a campaign against North West Water's plan to expand the use of pre-payment water meters in its area.

It is time for the Government to recognise the real and growing public concern about such devices. It is time for them to recognise that, under legislation passed by the House at the time of privatisation, clear rules and criteria were laid down about the circumstances in which a customer could be cut off. It is time for them to recognise that those arrangements cannot co-exist with the operation of pre-payment water meters, which bypasses them completely.

It is also time for the Government to start collecting figures relating to the number of customers whose supplies have been interrupted—the Government may not like the word "disconnected"—by the operation of pre-payment meters. If it is possible for local authorities to monitor the position, why is it so difficult for the Government to do so—or is it simply that they do not want to? The disconnections are real: thousands of customers throughout the country are having their water supplies cut off, without any court orders, because of the operation of pre-payment meters. Surely it is time for the Government to recognise that they should at least show some interest and concern.

Is it not time for the Government to accept that, if a family are without water, it will not matter to them why they are without water—whether it is because of the operation of a device on the wall, or because of a court order? The health risks will be exactly the same. That should not be of concern to the customer alone.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): My hon. Friend has mentioned health risks. No doubt he is aware of the letter sent by the chief executive of Liverpool health authority, Mr. Hoyle, to Brian Staples, chief executive of United Utilities. That letter clearly spells out that, even if the Government take no notice of what the public and local authorities think, the introduction of pre-payment meters is a dangerous move, which increases health risks considerably.

Mr. Burden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am sure that that will be an underlying theme in today's press conference in Liverpool, which will deal with the health problems associated with the operation of such meters.

Only a couple of months ago, the Save The Children Fund published a lengthy, thoughtful and well-researched report about the impact of normal water metering on low-income families. Hon. Members who have not yet looked at that report should do so. It makes the point that I made earlier—that the spread of pre-payment meters could make the problems of water poverty and disconnection associated with the operation of ordinary meters even worse.

Disconnection is a major problem; that is why there was a public outcry a few years ago. It is not good enough for either the Government or Ofwat to say that the number of disconnections has fallen by 42 per cent. in one year, while omitting from the figures the growing number of disconnections that result from the use of pre-payment water meters.

I have mentioned easy payment terms. Some time ago, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Mrs. Jackson) and Conservative Members, I met Ministers to examine ways in which low-income families could be helped to spread the cost of their water bills. Much more could be done in terms of the relationship between water bills and the benefits system: water charges could be taken out of benefits, if the customer wishes, more effectively than at present. I welcome the increase in the number of watercards, as used by Severn Trent; the electricity companies are using them as well. I approve of ways in which the payment of water bills is made as easy and flexible as possible.

It would not be a bad idea for the benefits system to reflect the true cost of water—and, as I have said, when the regulation of the water industry is examined, it would not be a bad idea to assess the overall cost of water to the customer, particularly the low-income customer, rather more thoroughly, and to pay more attention to the problem of water poverty. That growing problem could be alleviated by allowing customers to spread their payments.

A family may be finding it difficult to make ends meet. They may then be presented with, as it were, a disconnection notice in one hand and a pre-payment water meter in the other. Perhaps they are having problems in coping with the weekly or monthly budget. Will they be able to pay the electricity bill and the gas bill? Has the telephone been cut off? What about the cost of the children's clothes?

If, as well as all that, the family have a large water bill to pay, will it really help them for the water company, Ofwat or indeed, the Government to tell them, "We have the answer to all your problems; the answer is to have a device fitted in your home, and to pay £26 for the privilege. The way in which that will help you is this: if you do not keep up the payments, you will run out of water"? Where is the logic in that? That does not help any family to pay their water bill, and it is time the Government recognised that.

Pre-payment water meters are potentially unlawful. That will no doubt be sorted out elsewhere. I hope that it does not have to go to court. I hope that the Government will recognise their responsibilities, recognise that it is time for them to stick by the legislation they passed at the time of water privatisation, and make it clear that water pre-payment meters have no place and should be outlawed.

9.59 am

Mr. William O'Brien (Normanton): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden) on his success in introducing this subject. The issue surrounding pre-payment water meters is serious, and one to which the House should give due regard.

The issue of standing charges has come to light because of the introduction of pre-payment water meters. Standing charges have become part of the unit cost; they are being lumped into the full water bill and divided into units, as my hon. Friend the Member for Northfield pointed out. Standing charges are therefore part of the debate on pre-payment.

The argument that Oflot and the water authorities have been using for years—that it is necessary to levy standing charges for pipes, meter readings, and so on—has been

[Mr. William O'Brien]

exposed as a myth by the introduction, or the suggestion of the introduction, of water meters. If for all these years we have been led to believe that there could be no changes in the application of standing charges, yet with the introduction of pre-payment water meters by various water authorities such charges are being abolished, can we believe Ofwat, its director and water companies about pre-payment water meters, or are we again being misled?

The charges for sewerage and sewage disposal are also included in the overall bill. We receive two water bills in the Yorkshire area—one for water supply and one for sewerage and sewage disposal. If those are lumped together, charges for sewerage and sewage disposal must be included in the unit costs of pre-payment water meters. People should be made aware of what their pre-payment water charges include. We are not being told the exact costs.

We have been told that, when the meter is charged, people can use as much water as they desire within that period. One would therefore assume that the customer is being advised. I would question Oflot and water companies on whether customers are being advised on all the issues involved.

As has been pointed out, if the charged key or charged card that allows the pre-payment water meter to function is not replaced and the water services are cut off, people will still have to pay the full bill for the year. Is the Minister aware that the full bill will include charges for sewerage and sewage disposal? Customers are being charged on two counts, and I do not believe that people have been advised correctly about it.

Other factors give rise for concern, especially in my county of Yorkshire. At present, there is no suggestion of the introduction of pre-payment water meters there. That is obviously because of the other arrangements relating to the interruption of water supply. If pre-payment water meters were installed in Yorkshire, they would apply in areas where there is still a ban on the use of water. There is a hosepipe ban in the area where I live and throughout the county of Yorkshire. So the idea that people who charge the pre-payment meters are allowed to use as much water as they desire during that period is not strictly correct. Hosepipe bans and other restrictions would still apply.

I was advised by an officer of Ofwat that a person would be able to use as much water as they wanted if one of the meters were installed, but that is not strictly correct in the Yorkshire Water area, due to the shortage of supply. Until that is put right—the Opposition day debate later will address that problem—the introduction of pre-payment water meters into the Yorkshire Water area should not be considered. It would be wrong to apply that procedure there.

I do not totally blame Yorkshire Water. Some of the responsibility lies here, with the Government. Indeed, I know that there is evidence that the Government have been neglectful of the warnings that have been given from time to time about the interruption of water supply in the Yorkshire area. Now, advice is being given that pre-payment water meters are the answer to the problem, by allowing people to judge for themselves and be the masters of their water supply.

The main reason for installing pre-payment meters—it is the same for my constituents who have had electricity or gas meters installed—is that people have difficulty in paying their water charges in instalments or every six months. The idea of pre-payment electricity and gas meters was to try to give the responsibility of continuity of supply to the customer. I fear that the same practice is being applied to water.

I have witnessed instances of a single mother, a single parent, a family on low income, unemployed people and people on minimum social benefit not having the opportunity to recharge their electricity or gas meters and having their supplies cut off. The same will apply to water supply. Although people can use an alternative to gas or electricity as a means of providing heat or power to cook, there is no alternative to the supply of water. They cannot, say, turn to solid fuel as they can in the supply of energy. They cannot turn to any other source of the facility that is necessary in every home if their water supply is cut off.

The introduction of pre-payment meters presents a social problem, and the Government should take a great deal more interest in this important matter. Ministers say that they are not responsible for keeping records of the number of people who are disconnected, and that it is the responsibility of the water companies, but there are social responsibilities, such as the threat to family health and especially to children and the elderly.

The social services departments of local authorities have some responsibilities when water supplies are disconnected, but no notice is given to those departments that a person is to be disconnected, and that generates a great deal of concern and breaches the legislation. Therefore, the Government have responsibilities, and need to look at the introduction of pre-payment meters with some in-depth interest to ensure that health and the quality of life will not be threatened by the termination of water supply.

I ask the Minister to consider the interruption of supply, the issue of two services—water supply and sewage disposal and treatment—the issue of unit costs, and the fact that standing charges are included in the total cost of pre-payment meters. The Government cannot say that they are not responsible for such matters, because, in the interests of public health and community services, they should give a lead. I ask the Minister carefully to consider my points and the concerns that have been expressed by hon. Members about the introduction of pre-payment water meters.

10.12 am

Mr. Chris Davies (Littleborough and Saddleworth): The provision of a water supply is so essential to the maintenance of a basic quality of life and public health that we might have assumed that any threat to its continued provision would be subjected to the most intense public scrutiny. However, local authorities such as mine, Oldham and Rochdale, and more than two dozen others are presently seeking to challenge the way in which water companies are introducing these pre-payment devices, because no proper regulation has so far been introduced. The debate must send a firm message to the Government that proper regulation is required.

I do not regard the issue of pre-payment water devices as simply black and white, in that we cannot simply cast aside any thought of these devices being introduced.

Evidently, some people like them. In theory, they have been introduced by water companies with the voluntary agreement of consumers, but the latter feel that they have been misled, and, as a consequence of being unable to meet the regular payments, they have self-disconnected their water supply.

I am sure that all hon. Members have experienced the problem of constituents who have sunk deeply into debt and know not where to turn coming to our advice centres, desperately seeking assistance to get out of an intolerable situation. Anything that can assist debt management may be of advantage to our constituents. The first key issue is the need to ensure—for the individual, but also for the sake of the community as a whole—that basic water supplies are maintained.

Secondly, there must be a mechanism for ensuring that supplies are paid for. It is not adequate to say that some people will be allowed not to pay their bills, while other people have to pay. There is no point in saying that there are easy payment methods, even for a commodity as essential as water, because, for people who are deeply in debt, there are no easy payment methods but simply a range of options, some of which may be less unpleasant than others.

Let us look at the system by which the water companies collect the money that is owed to them for a water supply. When bills remain unpaid, applications are eventually made to magistrates, but it is only with the greatest reluctance that courts will sanction disconnection, and usually it is done only after arrangements for payment have been broken a number of times. It is right that courts are reluctant to accede to a water company's request to disconnect.

When hon. Members table parliamentary questions about disconnections, Ministers are obliged to reply. In recent months, there has been a drop in reported disconnections, and I suspect that that is a consequence of the introduction of pre-payment water devices, because water companies are targeting those customers who are most likely to fall behind in their payments, seeking their permission to install the devices.

We must look carefully at how pre-payment devices work in practice, and their consequences for the consumer and the water companies. First and most important, as they are presently conceived and introduced, they do not provide an appropriate means of assisting a consumer in any sort of co-ordinated debt management strategy. In practice, they give priority to the payment of the water company's debts.

The advice to someone who is deeply in debt, with a multitude of creditors, will be to look at the entirety of the problem and to prioritise the debts, seeking to ensure that some money is paid to each creditor so as to keep the creditors at bay. That does not happen here. The problem for the consumer might be worsened, because, to maintain a water supply, the consumer gives priority to payments to the water company, thereby increasing indebtedness to other organisations.

Secondly, I fear that, far too often, the installation of these pre-payment devices is voluntary in name only. The water company official may turn up on the doorstep with the device readily to hand and place a contract and a pen in front of the consumer saying, "Here you are. Voluntary agreement. Put one in. Easy payments. If you don't, we will take you to court." Few people will not feel intimidated in such circumstances, and I suspect that, placed in such a situation, the vast majority would agree to the installation of the device, without appreciating the possible consequences.

Thirdly, the practical result is that self-disconnections are increasing, and are occurring away from the public gaze. That is different from disconnections that are authorised through court procedures.

The final point is that the introduction of these devices, as has been pointed out, provides no assistance with the saving of money. They are not like an electricity or a gas meter, where supply may be cut off but at least consumers face no cost during the period in which they are deprived of power. In this case, the bills continue to mount, whether the water is coming through the taps or not.

Pre-payment water meters could have a role in a proper debt management strategy, but not as they are at present. The devices as used and installed are not taking full advantage of the electronic and technological opportunities that are available.

For example, it would be possible for such meters to be installed with a device that would ensure that, although disconnection took place, one hour's water supply per day was permitted. That might overcome some of the public health concerns that hon. Members have expressed. I am told by the House of Commons Library, however, that, although it is possible to install such devices, not one water company has yet done so. They are therefore not seeking to find a grey, middling solution, but going simply for the black-and-white solution and saying, "You will have full disconnection and nothing else."

It would be possible to link pre-payment devices to water meters so that they worked a bit more effectively, in the same way as electricity and gas meters operate. In that way, if people are not paying for their water supply, they are at least not incurring the additional charges that must be met in any case. That would help the person to feel that, if they were cut off for, say, 12 hours at a time because they had been late getting to the post office or because they had not been able to restock the card, at least their debts were not increasing come what may. In practice, however, such modifications are not being introduced on a large scale by any water company.

As we consider this question, we must be concerned above all about how important water supply is to an average family. The idea of cutting down the water supply even to one hour a day is intolerable to many of us. None the less, there are hard questions to be faced, and I recognise that any Government would have difficult choices to make in balancing questions of water supply against the need for payment.

In the Minister's reply, I shall be looking for certain assurances. The first is a clear statement that the Minister recognises the need for proper Government regulation on this issue, regulation that, to date, has clearly been lacking. It is important that proper procedures are laid down by Parliament for the introduction of these devices, that there is independent scrutiny and that there are proper checks and controls on the actions of water companies, which, to date, seem to be motivated entirely by commercial interests.

Secondly, I look to the Minister to say that water companies will be required to make it possible for hon. Members to obtain information about the number of self-disconnections taking place. If that is too difficult,

[Mr. Chris Davies]

we should be able to find out at least how many self-disconnections are occurring for more than 24 hours at a time.

It is important that devices do not cut off water supply for more than a basic maximum period. I have said that devices can be installed which cut off water supply for 23 hours a day but which still leave a basic minimum water supply. Under any circumstances, 23 hours without water should be the absolute maximum permitted by law. Further devices could be introduced which, for example, do not cut off water supply at all, but leave simply an irritating tone—perhaps a bit like a smoke alarm bleeping—that reminds the consumer that there is a need to stock up the water meter, without interfering with that vital supply of water.

Finally, the Minister must recognise the need for some proper court supervision of procedures. Disconnections take place only after they have been properly scrutinised by the court, yet water companies are being allowed to escape that proper legal scrutiny. That should not be tolerated.

If there is to be a future for pre-payment devices, they must be subjected to proper parliamentary control or, on a day-to-day basis, to proper scrutiny by the courts. It is important that there is voluntary agreement by householders and that they are able to look to independent arbitration and scrutiny to ensure that their interests are not consumed by those of commercially minded water companies. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

10.25 am

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden) on bringing to the House's attention a subject of great importance. It is perhaps regrettable that no Conservative Back Bencher has thought that there is a problem, or even that the matter needs to be debated. I find that somewhat surprising.

I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Littleborough and Saddleworth (Mr. Davies): in the Minister's response, we must have an assurance that he recognises that the Government have a responsibility to do something in this matter. Water supply is crucial to the everyday life of people in this country—so crucial that it cannot be left to market forces alone. The Government must take action to regulate and control the way in which pre-payment devices can be used. We cannot allow it to be left just to privatised companies to determine the way ahead. The Government must consider the implications.

Secondly, I refer again to the letter that I mentioned in an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Northfield. All too often, the Government tend to ignore the public's views—they do not think the public matter—and those of local authorities, but I hope that, on an issue of such importance, they will take account of the views of health authorities. That is why I referred to the letter from the chief executive of Liverpool health authority to the chief executive of United Utilities. The health authority is not in my constituency—that covers East Lancashire health authority further up country—but United Utilities serves the region in which I live.

The letter was sent on 26 March, when a trial was being considered in the Liverpool region, and my hon. Friend the Member for Northfield referred to the protests in Liverpool today about this very issue. The letter states:

"However, that is the opinion of Dr. Martyn Regan, Consultant in Communicable Disease Control, that measures such as the introduction of a Water Card Budget Scheme may lead to an increase in self-disconnection and could therefore only increase the risk of transmission of gastro-intestinal diseases, both in the household and the community."

Dr. Regan is not saying that such a measure will have that result; all he is saying—he is not overstating the case—is that it may do so. The fact that it may do so means that the Government should ensure that it does not do so. I emphasise the words at the end, which refer not only to the household but to the community. That must be recognised. Even under the old system, the people who came to see me at my advice bureau were not those whose supply had been disconnected, but neighbours who were concerned about problems created by that disconnection. The health authority is not overstating the case. Water is so crucial in every way for health that we must ensure that the budgetcard schemes are properly run and controlled.

Finally, in fairness to North West Water—or United Utilities, as it now is—I must add that the health authority welcomed its proposal to introduce a customer counselling initiative. My hon. Friend the Member for Northfield mentioned a slightly different scheme. The Opposition have not hammered the water authorities—or rather, the water companies, as they now are. We have tried to take a balanced approach—to criticise where we think that they are wrong, but also to put the more positive side.

The counselling initiative can step in when people are getting into difficulties with payment, advise them and help them to pay, so that they are not disconnected, with all the risks that that entails for households, especially for those containing sick or elderly people, or young children, and also to the neighbours and the wider community. The Government clearly have a responsibility to ensure that the new means of cutting people off as a way of seeking payment—at the end of the day, it means self-disconnection—is properly controlled and monitored.

10.30 am

Mrs. Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden), who has worked hard on the subject for several years, and I shall make three points in support of his arguments. Fundamentally, this is the same debate as we had on whether water disconnections should be legal or illegal. Primarily, the issue is one of public and environmental health. Does the water supply to a home come into the bracket of essential public services, or can it be seen as an optional extra for families?

Those of us who came together at the time of the disconnections debate and formed the all-party parliamentary water group did so chiefly because of our view that water was such an essential public service that it could not be treated in the same way as other utilities that one could choose to use or to do without. A house without running water is still considered statutorily unfit, and a work site without running water is illegal. Running water is essential. Therefore, no payment system or device that contains within it the means of cutting off the supply to a home should be supported.

Secondly, I hope that the Minister will at least take on board the last point in early-day motion 835—the request for such disconnection figures to be included in the regular annual disconnection figures supplied by the Director General of Water Services. As it happens, those figures came out today, and the last year's total was 5,826. Yes, it is lower than the high spot of 21,000, but the 1,212 households disconnected via the new devices last year should be added to it.

In 1994, the director general was pressed by the Institution of Environmental Health Officers to publish figures for disconnections related to pre-payment water devices. He wrote that he did not think that appropriate at that time, because the devices had been introduced on a trial basis. But there is absolutely no reason why the director general should not immediately be asked to make those figures public, as he does with other disconnection figures. I hope that the Minister agrees.

In view of the shortness of time, my next point must be my last. I stress what my hon. Friends have already said—that, although water has to be paid for, there are many other ways of making paying for it easier. Smartcard systems are available whereby one pays in small chunks, without the risk of disconnection. People on benefit should have an automatic right to have their bills paid directly, which is not now the case. Many water companies are investigating other methods, such as easy payment systems and debt counselling, in an effort to ensure that water bills are paid without their having to resort to the use of a device or to other action that results in households' supply of such an essential commodity being cut off.

10.35 am

Ms Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden) on securing a debate on what he has described as water disconnection by the back door. As my hon. Friend said, the debate is timely, in that, two weeks ago, 26 local authorities, led by Birmingham city council, announced their challenge to the legality of the use of pre-payment water meters as a means of disconnection under the Water Industry Act 1991. The Opposition wholeheartedly support that action, and reject the water regulator's assertion that such use is legal.

The debate is also timely in view of the alarming increase in the number of pre-payment meters. A little more than a year ago, in March 1995, there were not many more than 4,000, but at the end of March this year there were 14,500 and, as my hon. Friend said, the number is now reckoned to be about 16,000.

Other Opposition Members have given a clear account of the arguments, so I shall simply summarise them. The devices in question are not volumetric; they calibrate collection charges, not the volume of water used, so they do not represent a conservation measure. They also result in higher charges overall, and customers often pay extra to use the system, as well as incurring extra costs for travelling to charge their smart cards or keys.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Normanton (Mr. O'Brien) said, there are additional concerns about standing charges and sewerage charges. Not only are the devices payment meters, but they effect disconnections. We believe that they are circumventing the law by allowing water companies to exercise the sanction of cutting off water without going to the courts, thus allowing them to act in secret. Local authorities are not notified of their actions, so, as my hon. Friend the Member for Normanton also said, social services departments cannot investigate a family's plight, or carry out their statutory duties towards any children and elderly people in the house.

We do not even know precisely how often self-disconnections occur. My hon. Friend the Member for Northfield mentioned the Birmingham research, which I too have seen. What struck me most was the fact that self-disconnections are now running at 20 times the rate of statutory disconnections. Some households had been disconnected every two to four weeks, some as many as 15 times. Surely that gives the lie to the suggestion that the number of water cut-offs is decreasing.

As we have heard, Severn Trent holds up its MORI survey on pre-payment water meters as evidence that customers approve of them. Yet 49 per cent. of respondents had experienced disconnections, and, during cut-offs for periods of longer than seven hours, 28 per cent. had borrowed water—that is illegal under the Water Acts—18 per cent. had stored water, and 13 per cent. had gone without water. The public health risks are obvious. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Mrs. Jackson) said, water cannot be equated with any other commodity.

The Government and the Minister should reflect on the fact that Save the Children became so concerned about pre-payment meters that it published a report on the subject. Its concern—which we should all share—is that the poorest families will keep losing their water supply as their money runs out. Even if the supply is cut off for only one or two days, insanitary conditions are created, with particular risks for children and the elderly.

The poorest families do not even save money by using these meters or by going without water, because the company goes on charging. The increase in water bills has made it difficult for poor families to keep in credit, but the regulator chooses not to see the paradox. The poorest are failing to keep in credit, while the industry fat cats have massive credit in the bank.

We can use any of the companies using pre-payment meters as examples. Severn Trent, which had 1,450 pre-payment devices in place in March this year, has a daily pipe leakage of 115 million gallons—enough to provide for the daily water needs of more than 4.25 million customers. The company's dividends, however, have increased by 69 per cent since privatisation. North West Water, with 1,400 pre-payment meters in place, has a daily leakage rate of 158 million gallons—enough to provide for 5.5 million customers. Dividends paid by the company have increased by 34 per cent. since privatisation.

Similar statistics apply to both Wessex Water and Welsh Water, which have thousands of pre-payment devices in place. Wessex Water is losing 25 million gallons of water daily—enough to meet the needs of 750,000 customers—but has increased the dividends paid by 90 per cent. since privatisation.

The Government have abrogated their responsibility, claiming that the use of pre-payment devices is

"a matter for the water companies".

[Ms Joan Ruddock]

But they cannot hide from the fact that thousands of families—many with children and the majority on very low incomes—have had their supply of clean water cut off as a result of operating these devices. As the use of pre-payment meters increases across the country, the numbers experiencing such cuts are set to rise. As my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) said, we want the Minister to accept the responsibility, and to respond accordingly.

It is a disgrace that water companies, which have made massive profits since privatisation and which lose millions of gallons of water through leakages each day, should penalise their poorest customers by denying them water because of their poverty. The Government have failed to acknowledge that this is an issue of public policy, with major public health implications. Once again, they have sided with the water fat cats and failed to act on behalf of customers.

No one disputes that, given the levels of poverty in this country, there will always be a pool of people who are struggling to pay bills for their most essential services. Such people need assistance, and should not be persuaded to accept a device that regularly puts their water supply at risk. My hon. Friends have today praised alternative methods of payment assistance, and Labour wholeheartedly supports such measures.

Water companies should begin to look at the alternatives, and should try to see that it is possible to help the poorest people by ensuring that they have a constant supply of clean water. We are anticipating that things will change, and that Labour will soon be in government. When we are in power, we will outlaw pre-payment meters which effect disconnections, and ban both compulsory metering and disconnections of domestic water supplies. That will bring about a civilised society and give our people a basic human right—a continuous and clean water supply.

10.44 am

The Minister for Construction, Planning and Energy Efficiency (Mr. Robert B. Jones): I have listened with considerable interest to the debate, which has confirmed that Labour Members wilfully misunderstand the purpose of the devices. The units were introduced to help people on low incomes to pay their water bills, and their introduction has extended the range of payment options available to customers. Therefore, it is a development that the Government support.

Today's debate has proved—if one needed evidence for it—that the Labour party opposes freedom of choice. The hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Ms Ruddock) emphasised that Labour in government would ban freedom of choice. The debate has been another demonstration that the Conservative party is the party of freedom of choice.

I join other hon. Members in congratulating the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden) on securing the debate, and focusing the House's attention on an important issue. But it is ironic that it should be an hon. Member representing a Birmingham constituency who is attacking the use of these devices. After all, it was Clive Wilkinson, the former Labour leader of Birmingham city council, who said about the pre-payment meters:

"The overwhelming view of customers in my area who have had them installed is that these units are a good thing. I have not received a single complaint about the units from customers. I do not want to see customers being denied the choice if they want to opt for one of these units."

It is clear from what Clive Wilkinson said—and from what the hon. Member for Deptford has said this morning—that the only way in which he will get his way is by voting Conservative at the next general election.

Ms Ruddock: The Minister has used this quotation on a previous occasion, and tried to suggest that there is a split in the Labour party. What he fails to mention, however, is that Clive Wilkinson is now Ofwat's central customer services committee chairman, and a member of Ofwat's national customer council. It may be presumed from that that Clive Wilkinson was speaking for the industry.

Mr. Jones: He was speaking for the consumer, something that the Labour party—and certainly the hon. Lady—never do.

Opposition Members will note that I have referred to budget payment units—not pre-payment water meters. In most cases, these devices do not measure the amount of water used, but provide a practical method of payment for those customers least able to pay their bills. The Opposition claim to represent them, yet in the same breath they wish to deny them the use of a sensible and convenient payment option.

Perhaps the views expressed today are based on a genuine misunderstanding of the way in which the units operate, why they are installed and their advantages. I am therefore grateful to have been given this opportunity to explain the facts about this payment method. I do so on the assumption that everyone accepts that services must be paid for.

Those of us who agree with that will also agree that a full range of payment options should be available. We must help people pay with the least disruption and difficulty to themselves, and allow them to choose what that is. Budget payment units ensure that customers who experience difficulties in paying their water bills, but endeavour to pay, are given every assistance in doing so. To put it another way, budget payment units are intended for customers who intend to pay their water bills and want some assistance in budgeting to do so.

The mechanics of the scheme are relatively simple. A control box is fitted—usually to a wall inside the customer's home. A valve is fitted to the water supply pipe, and the customer is provided with an electronic smart card or key. The customer then charges the card with credits locally—usually at a Post Office—and then transfers the credits on the card to the control box. Credits represent the length of time during which the customer can use water services normally, and the control box keeps track of the amount that the customer has paid. This information is compared with the amount that the customer has agreed to pay in any period.

Opposition Members have referred to problems when customers are unable to recharge their cards or are unable to get to a post office do so. However, the inherent advantage of the payment scheme is that the units are pre-programmed with an emergency seven-day credit, and that, before the normal credit runs out, the customer is

warned audibly that his or her credit is running out and that the emergency credit will shortly be activated. The customer then has seven days to recharge the card, and he or she will continue to receive a water supply during this period.

Another advantage of the system is that the technology employed informs the water company that the normal credits have been used, and that the emergency credits have been activated. The water company will try to contact the customer if the emergency credit period is running out and the unit has not been recharged. The company will also inform the local authority's environmental health officer about the situation. The water flow will be temporarily stopped at the end of the seven-day emergency credit period if the unit has not been recharged before then, but the flow will be restored immediately once the unit has been recharged to meet the amount outstanding.

I might share the concerns of the hon. Member for Northfield over the use of these units if they were imposed on unwilling customers by unfeeling water companies. However, these units—for which there is no installation charge—are installed only with a customer's agreement and at his or her request. I wish to emphasise the voluntary nature of this scheme—I find it difficult to understand why anyone would wish to object to the free choice made by responsible people in deciding which payment method best suits their needs.

Before a unit is installed in a customer's home, an agreement is made between the company and the customer about any payment problems that they may have. When deciding an affordable weekly or fortnightly charge, any arrears are included in the scheme only if that is the customer's wish. Furthermore, the charge amount agreed initially may be re-negotiated at a later date to take account of any change in the customer's circumstances.

Before a unit comes into use, a company official will ensure that the customer fully understands how the unit operates, including how to access the emergency credit period, where the units may be recharged and how to contact the company in the event of any problems. The official also ensures that the customer is fully aware of the procedure that is activated if the charge card is not recharged—that the company will contact the customer concerned, and that the local authority's environmental health officer will be informed of the situation.

The MORI survey on the use of Severn Trent's water key system found that 90 per cent. of customers on the scheme considered it a convenient method of paying their water bills, and that 88 per cent. said that they wanted to continue paying for their water with the system.

Mr. Burden: Clearly, the Minister has spent a great deal of time looking through his brief on this issue. Given the amount of work that he and his civil servants have put into this, why have the Government not collected figures on the number of customers who have had their water supplies cut off as a result of the operation of prepayment water meters? Will the Minister collect and publish the statistics?

Mr. Jones: This is a free agreement between customers and the supplier of water, and the Government see no reason to intervene in those freely arranged undertakings. The research carried out in 1995 for North West Water on the use of that company's watercard budget system found that more than 90 per cent. of customers considered the scheme an affordable and convenient way to pay, and preferred it to any other payment method. Welsh Water's research also showed that more than 90 per cent. of participating customers were satisfied with the scheme.

I do not think it unreasonable for me to suggest that those findings suggest that the overwhelming majority of customers using budget payment units find them the best and most convenient way of budgeting for their water bills.

The exhaustive procedure adopted by water companies in informing those customers about this payment method is based on a code of practice that was developed by the water industry associations in July 1995. The code describes in general terms the basis on which this payment method would be offered to and used by customers, and includes an obligation on the part of the company to explain fully in writing the total cost, any charge and the way the unit is calibrated to those involved in the scheme. The director general has welcomed the key principles of this code, but Mr. Byatt has made it clear to water companies that the code will need to be reviewed periodically, and revised in the light of experience.

Ofwat and the customer service committees have kept a watching brief on developments over the past three to four years, and all companies conducting trials on pre-payment devices have consulted customer service committees, and provided reports to them as trials have progressed. The result has been that the Ofwat national customer council recently endorsed budget payment units, saying that they should be available to all customers to help to take the worry out of paying water bills.

The users of the device do not share the Opposition's concerns. Nevertheless, it is important to keep the debate about this payment method in a proper perspective. The latest figures show that some 16,000 customers use the units—that is less than one tenth of 1 per cent. of all domestic customers.

As I have explained, a number of measures are in place to help prevent the water supply from being temporarily stopped as result of the operation of these units. The water flow is temporarily stopped for two main reasons: some customers experience difficulties in getting to a post office to recharge their cards, and other customers simply forget to recharge their cards.

While the location and number of post offices taking part in the schemes has been a problem in some cases, results of surveys show that this was not a problem for the overwhelming majority of customers. I understand, however, that companies are considering the possibility of making the recharging facility available in places other than post offices.

Sometimes, the temporary stopping of the water flow has been found to be deliberate—cases have been recorded in which customers have gone away for a period and have used the occasion to defer recharging their cards. Customers who pay for water charges on the basis of rateable value and use this budgeting option—which accounts for practically all customers—are still liable to pay the full annual water bill. I understand that the great majority of occupied properties restore their water flow within 24 hours.

Opposition Members have claimed that the use of the scheme is a ploy by water companies to avoid the time and expense involved in obtaining court orders to

[Mr. Jones]

disconnect a customer's water supply. That is far from true—disconnections are reserved as an ultimate sanction against customers who can pay but will not pay. I shall repeat one of my opening remarks: these units are intended to help customers who intend to pay their bills. My reading of the situation is that water companies genuinely want to make a success of the scheme, and are doing all in their power to help those customers who have opted for this facility.

Mr. Chris Davies: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Jones: No—I am trying to reply to the points that have been made in the debate.

It has been suggested that the arrangement would be more acceptable if the water flow was not temporarily stopped when a unit was not recharged, as agreed by the customer and company. I believe that the retention of the on-off valve is essential to the continuing success of the scheme.

Today, claims have been made that the operation of these units results in self-disconnection by the customer, and that such disconnections are not reported in Ofwat's bi-annual report on disconnections. The status of a water flow that has been temporarily stopped—which occurs when a valve connected to a pre-payment device shuts off the flow of water—is an issue that has been raised by a number of interested parties. The director general has stated that he does not consider that a customer's operation of a prepayment device which shuts off the flow of water in a property amounts to action by the company either to disconnect the supply pipe or to cut off the supply of water to a property.

The temporary stopping of a water flow is not a disconnection, because the supply continues to be available as long as the customer recharges his card. In fact, the rationale underlying this payment method is precisely to avoid placing customers in situations where they may be taken to court and where disconnection becomes a possibility. We should all remember that disconnections are not in the interests of customers or water companies. Similar payment devices have been widely used by the gas and electricity industries, and have been helpful in reducing the total number of disconnections.

I understand that some councils have reservations about the legality of using budget payment units as a means of paying for water. Should they decide to launch a legal challenge against one or more of the water companies that are using these devices, or the regulator, it would be a matter for the courts to decide. In the light of this, I will not say anything further about the proposed challenge, except to note that the chairman of the Ofwat national customer council has commented:

"This action pays no regard to the fact that these units can help customers to budget for their water bills, and that customers have expressed great support for them. I can't understand why some local authorities are trying to stop water customers from being able to choose this flexible and convenient payment method. I would have thought that they would share the objectives of Ofwat's National Customer Council that customers should have the widest range possible of payment options".

Amen to that.

It is true that, at present, a few companies impose a small cover charge of around 50p or less a week to use this system, or for the cost of replacing repeatedly lost or damaged cards. However, most companies that provide this payment option do not make any charge for the facility—and it should not be forgotten that the alternative of frequent cash payment of water bills at post offices involves a cost, too. The director general has asked companies to ensure that any charges are soundly based. It is also true that some of the units installed by Severn Trent Water have had problems, but new technology always results in teething problems.

It seems clear today that what is at stake is the principle of customer choice. There is a clear divide between the two sides of the House: the Labour party is wholly opposed to customer choice and the Conservative party, as always, will defend it.

Metropolitan Green Belt

10.59 am

Sir Michael Shersby (Uxbridge): It is some considerable time since there was a debate in the House about one of the nation's most priceless assets—the metropolitan green belt, which is greatly valued by millions of people who live both inside and outside the metropolis. At present, it is under attack from developers and sometimes, I am sorry to say, from local authorities. That attack is undoubtedly absorbing the energies and resources of both local and central Government as an almost endless stream of public local inquiries has to be held to deal with appeals and applications that are called in.

My purpose in raising the subject is to seek reassurance from the Government that they will remain steadfast in resisting the attack and that, above all, they will continue to resist the blandishments of those who argue that permission for their development is in the national interest because it would represent a substantial inward investment in Britain. I say that because some would-be developers from abroad use just that argument. My reply is that the green belt is not for sale, whatever the price, and I shall return to that aspect later.

I wish to declare an outside interest: I am president of the London Green Belt Council—a voluntary organisation whose members consist of residents' associations and others interested in preserving the green belt. I hasten to inform the House that the position is unpaid.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): I should like to place on record the gratitude that those who care for the metropolitan green belt feel towards not only my hon. Friend as president, but Mr. Ronald Smith, the chairman, and to all the committee members of that voluntary organisation. Will my hon. Friend bear in mind that his and his colleagues' diligence and vigilance are a major factor in protecting our metropolitan green belt—one of the undoubted post-war planning successes?

Sir Michael Shersby: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention and I entirely agree with his remarks about the chairman and officers of the London Green Belt Council, who put in a huge amount of work throughout the year on an entirely voluntary basis. They have been extremely successful in defending green belt policy around the metropolis. My hon. Friend has unique knowledge of the council's work as he was, for some time, my predecessor as its president.

It is worth recalling how green belt policy became the best-known single element of the United Kingdom's town and country planning policy and how it gained enormous prestige as a symbol of Government attempts to control the unpleasant effects of urbanisation. It is almost like the Clean Air Act 1956, which put an end to the London smogs. Green belt policy was formulated at much the same time as that Act, and there was a balance between the twin policies of improving the quality of air in cities and preventing the spread of cities, notably London, into the countryside.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Mid–Staffordshire): Does my hon. Friend accept that, given the spread of industrial urban sprawl, the metropolitan green belt has great importance not only to London, but to smaller cities such as Lichfield, where Birmingham threatens to encroach on the surrounding green belt land? Does my hon. Friend recall that Sutton Coalfield used to be a separate city, distant from Birmingham? It is now more or less a suburb of Birmingham—the people of Lichfield resent that and fear that it may happen to their own fair city.

Sir Michael Shersby: My hon. Friend makes a good point, although my debate is on the metropolitan green belt. I am sure that my hon. Friend, conscious as he is of the effects in the midlands, will no doubt seek to raise the subject on an Adjournment debate. We could have a string of debates and perhaps persuade my hon. Friend the Minister for Construction, Planning and Energy Efficiency that, throughout the country, there is considerable concern about the subject.

As I was saying, green belt policy was formulated at much the same time as the Clean Air Act 1956 and there was a balance between the twin policies of improving the quality of air in cities and preventing the spread of cities, notably London, into the countryside. Those policies have been hugely popular among all sections of the community.

Although ideas relating to green belt date back as far as the last century, it was not until 1933 that Sir Raymond Unwin proposed a green girdle that placed emphasis on the need for accessible open space and recreational land such as playing fields. In 1944, Sir Patrick Abercrombie produced proposals for the planned development of the London region. He proposed a green belt ring extending for about five miles beyond the suburban ring of development. It was to include not only green belt Act land, but much more open land, not necessarily in public ownership, but nonetheless kept permanently safeguarded against development to provide for London the first stretches of open country. That is a concept that should, even today, be kept at the forefront of our minds when considering the purposes of the green belt.

With the passage of the Town and Country Planning Act 1947, it became possible for the first time for local authorities to restrict development without paying compensation.

Mr. Keith Vaz (Leicester, East): Under a Labour Government.

Sir Michael Shersby: So it was. I pay tribute to the foresight of that policy. As I have said, it is hugely popular and welcomed by all sections of the community and by all parties. The key application of the principle of restricting development without paying compensation was implemented in 1955 by a statement to the House by the then Minister of Housing and Local Government, Duncan Sandys, later Lord Duncan-Sandys, to whom I pay tribute for his foresight. He stressed the duty to prevent

"the further unrestricted sprawl of great cities"

and noted:

"The development plans submitted by the local authorities for the Home Counties provide for a Green Belt, some 7 to 10 miles deep, all around the built-up area of Greater London. Apart from some limited rounding-off of existing small towns and villages, no further urban expansion is to be allowed within this belt."—[*Official Report*, 26 April 1955; Vol. 540, c. 45.]

Mr. Fabricant: Is not much of the encroachment into the metropolitan green belt for the construction not of industrial property, but of homes? Is it not ironic that it is the Labour-controlled councils in central London that have so many unoccupied homes? If some of the 800,000 unoccupied homes across the country were filled, would there not be less pressure on the green belt?

Sir Michael Shersby: My hon. Friend makes his own point on that matter. I shall return to the question of housing later.

I should like to focus the House's attention on the policy statements made by that great, distinguished politician, Duncan Sandys. He reckoned that planning authorities should consider establishing a green belt for a number of purposes, one of which related to urban areas, where every effort should be made to prevent any further building for industrial and commercial purposes. Those words should ring in our heads throughout any debate on the green belt.

So it was that the metropolitan green belt came into existence. By 1991, it amounted to about 1.2 million acres. I believe that it has become the symbol of the Government's desire to prevent the ruin of the countryside by excessive development. Therefore, any attempt to relax the rules creates tremendous opposition, which has effectively prevented most changes from occurring. That opposition has not prevented developers from trying to get around the rules by one subterfuge or another, and nowhere is that subterfuge more evident than in the London borough of Hillingdon, in which my constituency of Uxbridge is situated.

Although it has a London prefix, Hillingdon is, and has always been, part of the county of Middlesex, which remains as an ancient geographical county despite the loss of its county council in 1964. The abomination of Greater London, which succeeded it, is no more after the abolition of the Greater London council in 1985. Hillingdon is a pleasant place, and contains about 12,000 acres of green belt land. That land effectively prevents urban sprawl from spreading out from the neighbouring boroughs of Ealing, in the east, from Harrow, in the north, and from Hounslow, in the south. It is a prime area of green belt.

Perhaps the most important area of green belt in my constituency is an area known as Hillingdon House farm, which spreads over about 140 acres and is greatly enjoyed by local residents. I shall give the House an independent opinion of the value of Hillingdon House farm—the opinion of the inspector who appraised the Hillingdon unitary development plan. He described it as having

"distant spires and broad views towards Harrow, a country walk towards the River Pinn and the last open air lido swimming pool."

I know it well. I spent many happy boyhood days on that site, and I swam nightly in that lovely swimming pool, which was used for the 1948 Olympic games. I have a very strong personal attachment to that area of green belt in my constituency.

Today, unfortunately, that land is under threat of development by a foreign developer—Warner Brothers, and its British partner, MAI plc—which believes that by spending £225 million on a theme park and film studios in Uxbridge, in the centre of our borough, it can persuade the local authority and possibly my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to disregard established green belt policy and to grant planning permission. That foreign developer is busy distributing glossy brochures of the type I am now holding, in an attempt to persuade local people that its benevolent intervention will bring huge economic benefits to the borough of Hillingdon.

Although no application has yet been made to Hillingdon council for planning permission, it has been announced that one will be made shortly. I can tell the House about the application from the information that has been so widely distributed. The proposal envisages the establishment of film studios combined with

"one of Britain's largest paid-for leisure attractions."

The site—which is to be called Movie World—is intended to attract between 2.5 million and 3 million visitors during the seven months of each year that it is planned to be open.

Warner Brothers said that the site was chosen because, out of 150 locations, it was the only one that was suitable, because of the excellent public transport links by road and rail. I invite the House to consider the impact on the transport infrastructure of some 2 million to 3 million people converging on that site from across the south of England and beyond. One thing is pretty certain: people would come by car in their thousands. They would cause massive congestion on the A40(M), the M25 and the M4, all of which are already carrying heavy volumes of traffic.

The increased traffic would represent a massive increase in atmospheric pollution and would undermine the whole basis on which traffic flows on those roads have been calculated by the Department of Transport. There would also have to be a new flyover off the A40 motorway to allow traffic to enter the site.

The company claims in its glossy publicity material that the theme park will establish the first new studio complex to be built in Britain since the end of the second world war. It ignores the fact that the friends of Elstree studios feel that film production should be resumed there on a considerable scale, and that there are people at other studio sites in the country who feel the same way.

Warner Bros has claimed that the economic benefits, both locally and nationally, will outweigh the disruption that would be caused during the construction period of some two and a half to three years and that they justify such a huge commercial enterprise in the green belt. It is commercial—quite contrary to the principles that have been laid down in our national green belt policy.

What is the reality of the proposals? I believe that, to a large extent, the reality can be seen by looking at similar theme parks that Warner Brothers has already constructed—first in Australia, and more recently at Dusseldorf in Germany. The first point to take account of is that the proposed theme park is not a replica of Disney World, such as those in Florida, California or in northern France. It is, in fact, a much inferior concept, which the developers are attempting to foist on the British on the basis that they are about to create a brand new film and television facility with a theme park based on the Hollywood image.

The same claims were made in Dusseldorf, where it was proposed to include functional studios to help the ailing German film industry. That was the sweetener used to obtain planning permission and German funds. However, I do not think that the Germans have the same advantage as we do in having a green belt protected by town and country planning legislation. The Germans in

Dusseldorf got not a harmonious group of Hollywood sound stages but a collection of mismatched factory buildings tucked away in one corner of the park.

What can people living in my constituency in the borough of Hillingdon expect of a similar Movie World studio complex and theme park, built in our green belt? The park's appearance will probably be much like an industrial estate, consisting of huge warehouses that will contain the proposed musical rides. If experience elsewhere is anything to go by, the buildings will be finished off with sprayed-on foam, and the appearance will be most unattractive. There is unlikely to be anything in the park to lift the spirit. The real motivation in the general layout will be the exploitation of every available space; every corner is likely to contain a shop selling Warner Brothers merchandise or an over-expensive food outlet.

I am sure that there will be acres of car and bus parking, probably unrelieved by trees. One can imagine the problems of getting some 15,000 visitors in and out of the site every day. How long would it be, I wonder, before the access roads would have to be enlarged to cope with that traffic? How many of the 50-year-old trees on the site would have to go if that happened?

Fortunately, one of my constituents recently visited the Warner Brothers theme park in Australia, so I have been able to get the flavour of that particular kind of development. She reports:

"the whole thing was very poor in comparison with the American versions of these theme parks . . . The noise was horrendous with the PA System pumping out music and announcements."

One can imagine the effect of that degree of noise on the surrounding residential areas of Uxbridge, Hillingdon and Ickenham. Presumably, that is what my constituents can expect if such a park is built in the metropolitan green belt. The noise, traffic, general congestion and pollution would seriously affect the quality of life of my constituents. In short, the development would be intolerable.

How would the millions of people travel to and from Movie World if it were ever to be built? I simply do not believe that a significant proportion of families would travel on public transport, using the Metropolitan and Piccadilly lines to the Hillingdon and Uxbridge underground stations. Passengers using both the local stations would need to make an onward journey by shuttle bus, which in itself would add to the congestion and atmospheric pollution.

In support of the proposed development in the metropolitan green belt, the developers claim that the theme park will create 900 jobs in the borough. An expert appraisal by Warner Brothers consultants, however, suggests a lower figure of about 130. Many of those jobs would be casual, part-time ones, and on a seven-month contract only. I recognise that such jobs would be useful because unemployment is a factor in the Uxbridge travel-to-work area, but, fortunately, the unemployment level is comparatively small, at about 6 per cent. or 2,540 people. Many of those unemployed people are, however, unlikely to obtain permanent jobs at such a theme park site, because the only jobs that are likely to be created would be a limited number of part-time ones.

It is highly possible that Warner Brothers would bring in staff from its Dusseldorf theme park to manage the site. It could do that easily if those staff are European Union nationals, who are therefore entitled to work in the United Kingdom.

All the arguments about the proposal, interesting though they may be, are beside the main point: how can such a proposal be acceptable in the metropolitan green belt? How can it possibly square with Duncan Sandys' statement that, even within urban areas thus defined, every effort should be made to prevent further building for industrial and commercial purposes? That is exactly what is proposed by Warner Brothers and MAI plc in Uxbridge. I wonder what the members of the Labour Government in 1947 who enacted the Town and Country Planning Act 1947 would have thought of that.

The proposal was discussed in secret with the leader of the Labour-controlled Hillingdon council and two of his colleagues, including his deputy, between the late spring of 1995 and early 1996. That was admitted in an article in last week's edition of the *Uxbridge Gazette*. Those talks followed a trawl of possible sites by DTZ, a firm of agents acting for Warner Brothers.

I am told that the leader of Hillingdon council discussed with DTZ the possibility of Warner Brothers using land at Hillingdon House farm, or land on the Minet site at Hayes or some of the remaining land at Stockley park in the south of the borough. According to the reports that I have read in the local newspapers, when the project was first announced, there was a considerable amount of enthusiasm for it from the leader of the council and some of his colleagues. The House should take into account what then happened.

I was told of the project on 7 February; the *Uxbridge Gazette* was briefed extensively on Friday 8 February and the Labour group on Hillingdon borough council was informed on Monday 9 February—two days before publication of a huge article about the site, and without being given any opportunity to veto the project. There was no contact with me or with the Conservative members of the council who represent the wards immediately surrounding the site. That is an unacceptable way for a local authority and for developers to proceed. I believe that the elected representatives of the people have the right to be consulted and to make their views known at the earliest possible stage. I am not trying to make any overt party political point; I am simply recalling the factual catalogue of events that took place.

In the 23 years that I have represented Uxbridge in the House, I have never known such huge public opposition as there is now against the theme park. As a result, an action committee has been set up known as the Hillingdon House Farm Action Committee. It is comprised of residents' associations and national bodies and it has been established on a purely non-party political basis. That committee is not opposed to theme parks as such, provided that they are sited on non-green belt land in a location that is acceptable to the local people. The committee has just one aim—to uphold green belt policy and to persuade the local authority to refuse planning permission when the application is made, or to persuade my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to call in the application and decide the issue for himself.

The residents and community associations in the borough of Hillingdon that have so far affiliated to the Hillingdon House Farm Action Committee are Court drive, Harefield, Ickenham, Hillingdon Federation, North Uxbridge, Northwood, Northwood Hills, Oak farm, Pastures Mead, Ruislip, South Ruislip, Tudor way, the Friends of Hillingdon House Farm, Hillingdon village, the Drive and Hercies road. Others are about to join.

[Sir Michael Shersby]

In addition, a number of organisations other than residents' associations have affiliated to the action committee, including the Uxbridge rugby football club; the Fourways women's club; the Ickenham and Uxbridge townswomen's guilds; the Ickenham traders; the Uxbridge and Ickenham Floral Arts Society; the Uxbridge Pool Action Group; the Uxbridge and District Canine Society; the Council for the Protection of Rural England, London branch; the Friends of the Earth, Hillingdon branch; and the London Wildlife Trust. Others are expected to join.

I have cited those names to the House not merely because, as hon. Members will readily appreciate, they are not ones with which they may be instantly familiar, but simply to demonstrate the scale of the opposition to the proposal to build on the metropolitan green belt. When the application is made I, together with my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson), will present a huge petition to Parliament signed by local residents calling upon the Secretary of State to take action and call in the application.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will be able to give me some assurances when he responds to the debate. I realise that he cannot comment on any potential planning applications, but I want him to make it clear beyond doubt that it is the policy of Her Majesty's Government to uphold green belt policy.

It is not just Hillingdon House farm that is under threat in Hillingdon today. Other green belt land adjoining Heathrow airport is affected by the Terminal 5 proposal. A motorway service area at Iver in Buckinghamshire, which immediately adjoins my constituency at Cowley, was the subject of an Adjournment debate on 18 December. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to confirm whether his Department intends to reopen the public inquiry into that motorway service area.

On 1 November, my hon. Friend the Minister for Railways and Roads made it clear to the House that the position had changed since the first public inquiry was held. It is not now proposed to build the link roads between the M4 and the M40 and, therefore, the Highways Agency does not believe that it is sensible to try to connect the motorway service area to the M25. Does the Department intend to reopen the public inquiry in order to consider matters that were not covered initially, or will the project be abandoned? Local people in my constituency and in Buckinghamshire would like to know the answer to that question.

In a recent Adjournment debate, I drew attention to the flagrant misuse of a site known as the Lizzards at Yiewsley in my constituency. Activities such as rock breaking and the recycling of soil and other materials have gone on at that pleasant green belt site for about two years. Hillingdon borough council's planning department has made heroic efforts to halt those operations, but the company directors are located offshore on the Isle of Man, which makes it difficult to deal with the problem. The matter was referred to the High Court, but it has not yet been resolved. According to my latest information, an application has been made to prioritise the case so that the High Court can hear the action. Perhaps my constituents in Yiewsley will then have some relief from the endless stream of lorries carrying soil and rocks that passes through restricted residential roads in that area.

Development of the former Townmead school site in West Drayton is the subject of a local public inquiry to be held on 30 May. Hillingdon borough council proposes to build social housing on part of the site. Moorhall open space at Harefield has been zoned metropolitan open land. Such land is in a category of its own—it is somewhere between green belt land and something else—and it is difficult to define. However, I understand that it enjoys considerable protection. I hope that my hon. Friend will spell out what that protection involves, as my constituents in Harefield are deeply concerned about part of that beautiful site being used for local authority development.

I hope that the House understands that my constituents feel that they are under considerable pressure. They are very apprehensive about the loss of green belt land and I urge my hon. Friend to apply his sharp mind to those difficult questions. I hope that he will remember also that only a mile or so to the west of my constituency, at New Denham in Buckinghamshire, in the constituency represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Smith)—who unfortunately cannot be present for this morning's debate as he is away on parliamentary business—Central Railways proposes to build a freight distribution depot that will gobble up another 140 acres of green belt land. The depot would be linked to a new railway that would carry freight on huge trains up to half a mile long via London to the channel tunnel.

Some 20 Members of Parliament are strongly opposed to that proposal. It would affect my constituents—particularly those in Ickenham, who face the prospect of trains which are up to half a mile long passing through residential areas at the rate of about 10 an hour. One can appreciate the noise that such trains will generate as they haul their heavy loads towards London and the channel tunnel. That application will be submitted under the Transport and Works Act 1992, and I realise that my hon. Friend cannot comment about the matter today. However, I mention it in order to highlight the fact that attacks on the green belt do not stop at Hillingdon—they are already moving westward into Buckinghamshire.

Although those local issues are vital for my constituents, the debate also provides a valuable opportunity to focus on wider issues affecting green belt land around the metropolis. Because green belt is open land, it is attractive to developers for factories, commercial developments of all kinds and for waste disposal. Examples include the elaboration of club and sporting facilities—notably golf clubs—into thinly disguised hotel and restaurant developments for general public use.

The proprietors of Stoke park in Buckinghamshire recently submitted an application to build a leisure facility that was supposedly incidental to the playing of golf. In reality, they proposed to build a 28-bedroom hotel where no residential accommodation had existed previously. It would have been used for a number of commercial activities unrelated to golf, such as conferences, wedding receptions and so on. Fortunately, that application was rejected by the South Buckinghamshire district council. Other developments include Hever in Orpington, which was actually a health and fitness suite, and Thundersley in Essex, which was a shop.

Industrial and commercial developments are sometimes described as theme or science parks and the like. About a year ago, a proposal was submitted to build a medi-park

at Harefield on green belt land in my constituency, adjacent to the local hospital. It was intended to produce materials and provide services for the cardio-thoracic unit at Harefield hospital. I objected to that proposal, as did many other local people. Fortunately, my right hon. Friend the Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), who at the time was Secretary of State for the Environment, permitted only the partial development of the site, which was considered to be in the national interest. He attached the strictest possible conditions to that development. The access roads were built, but I am glad to say that today the green belt site remains peaceful. It was never developed in the way that the developers proposed initially and I believe that it has now been sold at a substantial loss. Perhaps its original purpose was different from the one that appeared on the planning application.

A museum for the furniture industry was proposed for green belt land at Dagenham. The proposal for a corporate headquarters, a research and development centre and a museum for McLaren cars at Mizens farm in Woking was called in by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

Horticultural nursery developments on green belt land also cause concern. There have been a number of applications to expand into retail businesses. A major example, which has not yet been determined by the planning authority, is the extension of the Gardens of the Rose near St. Albans. The development would include a three-storey building housing an exhibition centre, a restaurant and a shop and three other buildings comprising a lecture theatre, a library, a reading room and classrooms. I am advised that those buildings would make the development a completely different enterprise, which would be inappropriate for the green belt.

As I have said, the green belt is a tempting location for incineration plants. The incineration plant in Hillingdon has caused endless problems for local residents, even though it is not on green belt land. My hon. Friend's Department believes that county councils must prove their case if they are considering granting planning permission for incineration plants in the green belt. Incineration plants can be located on green belt sites only if there are no alternative sites available. However, it appears that some local authorities scarcely try to protect the green belt. As a Member of Parliament from Hertfordshire, my hon. Friend will know that Hertfordshire county council tried to write into its plans that such developments were not inappropriate in the green belt.

The Minister for Construction, Planning and Energy Efficiency (Mr. Robert B. Jones): It is a Labour and Liberal Democrat-controlled county council.

Sir Michael Shersby: I am sure that the House will note my hon. Friend's comment.

I understand that Surrey county council has listed among possible sites one at Wisley close to the Royal Horticultural Society gardens, which would suffer from the consequences. It is strongly opposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Esher (Mr. Taylor).

There are considerable housing pressures. Some local authorities tend to regard the green belt as expendable rather than accept a policy to put a physical limit on development. They choose deliberately, or encourage through ignorance, the belief that green belt equates with scenery—that is one of the most dangerous assumptions that anyone can make—so that they can sacrifice green belt that they consider is not particularly attractive. Examples include affordable housing in rural areas. Advice in policy planning guidance notes is clear; it says that, in the green belt, affordable housing should be within settlements. I am advised that Surrey is trying to make it "within or at the edge of" settlements and some districts elsewhere have done the same. That would mean expanding villages into the green belt in conflict with what the green belt is supposed to be.

On 26 April, an article in the journal *Planning* said that the Department of the Environment is now adopting a firmer line to enforce the policy. It is reported that

"nine appeals involving nearly 150 potential homes have been decided since 1992. Of those, proposals outside villages were generally not upheld."

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will pay close attention to that aspect of the problem. If green belt villages are treated differently from non-green belt villages, it should stop. It would fatally undermine green belt policy. I am sure that an exemption would be claimed in relation to affordable housing, but in reality it would be unlikely to stop there.

There is the ready assumption by some planning authorities that household predictions justify changes in green belt policy. There is a continuing inconsistency that I hope that my hon. Friend will consider.

I am told that in Bedfordshire the structure plan has recently got into considerable confusion and that the revised Hertfordshire structure plan seems set to go the same way. In addition, the current draft of the Hertfordshire plan implies that developments of under 500 dwellings are too small to concern the county council. That is stated as part of a definition of "major development" and is not in a green belt or non-green belt context.

Mr. Robert B. Jones: It is a Liberal Democrat and Labour county council.

Sir Michael Shersby: My hon. Friend has made a point about the political complexion of the county council. I am trying to keep away from party politics this morning and to concentrate on green belt matters. However, my hon. Friend's point is relevant and will be noted.

Challenging household predictions is difficult territory. It requires a great deal of expertise, of which the Council for the Protection of Rural England is the best conservation exponent. Some authorities are more robust in challenging predictions than others. For example, Berkshire has done so in the past and Cheshire seems to be doing so now in respect of its green belt. In contrast, Hertfordshire county council has a plan which, while protecting part of the county nearest London, proposes to take a swathe of attractive countryside nearly two miles long, west of Stevenage, cut off by the M1, for 5,000 dwellings with a possibility of another 5,000 some years ahead. Surely that makes nonsense of green belt policy. That project has not yet reached the stage of examination in public, but no doubt it will be a matter for consideration in due course by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

[Sir Michael Shersby]

The problem of white land provides a continuing source of confusion arising from confused policy by the Department. It was originally stated—between 1965 and 1985—that land which the Secretary of State of the day had not decided whether to approve as green belt could be treated as green belt until the decision was made. Over the years, as decisions were made, white land gradually disappeared, either becoming green belt or not. The concept is now being reintroduced in an even more confusing manner and as land which, when new or revised plans are drawn up, is not needed for development. I hope that my hon. Friend will look at that.

At least one county council now wants to downgrade some approved green belt land to white land and to push the present green belt boundary further out, making the land between it and the town white land. My hon. Friend's Department has not yet said that such a practice would be wrong and I hope that he will take an early opportunity to do so, either this morning or in the near future.

I hope that my hon. Friend will take account of the fact that the guidance is ambiguous and confused and is not helped by paragraph 2.12 of policy planning guidance note 2. It is no use having green belt which can be pushed back whenever boundaries are reviewed. The proper course is surely to use up genuine white land, stop when the green belt boundary is reached and, if one cannot leap over it, declare that no further development is acceptable.

There is the Thames gateway, a commendable concept strongly supported by my hon. Friends the Members for Gravesham (Mr. Arnold) and for Dartford (Mr. Dunn) and, doubtless, by others. The concern expressed about that by the London Green Belt Council relates to the publicity that I am told emphasises development and gives insufficient attention to the countryside. The London Green Belt Council thinks that conservation interests should play a greater part in the running and selling of Thames gateway, and that applies to both banks of the Thames.

There is the strange designation of compensatory green belt for that which is lost. The courts have held that very special circumstances are required to change green belt boundaries and they apply as much to extending it as reducing it. In general terms, that seems indisputable, but in practice it is much easier to lose green belt than to gain it and there is no requirement, as there is when registered common land is lost, to designate other land in exchange. When major pieces are lost, there should be a willingness to add land to the green belt. A major proposal to that end is being advocated by conservation interests in respect of the Hoo peninsula in Kent.

I hope that, in the 46 minutes that I have been speaking, I have been able to set out some of the real concerns that exist about the threat to the metropolitan green belt from developers and from some local authorities. We are all trustees for the green belt. If we want to hand it on to successive generations for them to enjoy, we must be ever-vigilant. Above all, we need a robust declaration from my hon. Friend the Minister, from the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) on the Opposition Front Bench and from all the other political parties in the House that they will stand up to those who chisel away at an inheritance that was made by those who conceived the idea of establishing the metropolitan green belt. We must not let them down.

11.47 am

Mr. Jacques Arnold (Gravesham): I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge (Sir M. Shersby) for raising this important debate. As he said, the metropolitan green belt is one of the greatest parts of our heritage around London and the south-east. It is vital that we conserve it. We owe a great debt to the far-sighted environmentalists of the 1930s who established the concept of the metropolitan green belt and to our predecessors in the Conservative Governments of the 1950s who laid down so many of the ground rules that have led to the continuing success of the green belt.

The metropolitan green belt is a particular enthusiasm of mine. As a student at the London School of Economics in the early 1970s, and in digs in Croydon, it was a great relief to get out into the countryside which was so close by and which was clearly delineated and protected by green belt legislation. It is just as relevant further east in my Gravesham constituency. That came home to me yet again very clearly only last Monday, when I joined dozens of my constituents in a sponsored walk from the village of Chalk, to the east of Gravesend, to the Thames marshes, which are such a bastion of environmental preservation and an important staging post for migrating birds. Indeed, the marshlands of the Thames are part of our great heritage, but they are under threat and should be carefully preserved.

The green belt in the borough of Gravesham is clearly defined. It runs along the route of the A2, to the south of Gravesend, and along the clear line of Thong lane at Riverview park and Castle lane at the village of Chalk, to the east. That line has been expanded of late by the imaginative action of Gravesham borough council—when it was Conservative controlled.

Some 20 years ago, when the borough was run by the Labour party, it acquired great stretches of land to the south of Riverview park to build vast council estates. Those estates did not proceed when the council went Conservative in the 1970s, but a large council debt of some millions of pounds was left behind. The Conservative council successfully disposed of a small portion of the land in the lower urban area for the development of housing and, with the proceeds, cleared the debt and dedicated the entire remainder of that agricultural land—comprising many acres south of Riverview park—to inclusion in the green belt, in which it is now secure. I assure the now Labour Gravesham borough council that the residents of Riverview park and I will keep a hawk eye on any intention to develop in that area, especially as it is now safely in the green belt.

My hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge referred to the Thames gateway proposal, which we in north Kent see as a marvellous opportunity for the creation of new jobs for people in our area. Safely included in the Thames gateway document are specific safeguards for our green belt and, notably, the green belt under greatest threat—that to the east of Gravesend. The "Thames Gateway Planning Framework Consultation Draft" document clearly states, on page 58:

"any revision to Green Belt boundaries should provide for strong protection for the countryside between Gravesend and Strood and incursion into the areas of national and international importance for wildlife or the best and most versatile agricultural land should be avoided."

That could hardly be clearer.

The area to the east of Gravesend, a large part of which is marshland, and the area to the south of the A2, include some of the most beautiful metropolitan green belt in the London area. One has only to visit Nurstead in the parish of Meopham or the remote and rural parish of Luddesdown, which is hidden away in a fold of the hills of the north downs, to see some countryside that has been remarkably preserved and has avoided the depredations of so-called civilisation over recent years. That countryside is only some 30 miles from the centre of London and this place.

The pressures on the metropolitan green belt are immense and include housing and the transport infrastructure of roads and, in Kent's case, the channel tunnel rail link. The pressure from housing is especially great and Kent county council, over the decades, deserves praise for the way in which it has fought off London overspill encroaching on the fair county of Kent. But the guard must be kept up against massive housing development in the green fields of Kent. At the moment, for example, Kent county council is considering the latest edition of the Kent structure plan. I note that many thousands of new houses have been suggested for 2006 to 2011. The Conservative group on Kent county council has always argued that the limit on any increase should be 26,000. In fact, there are strong pressures for far higher figures. I congratulate the group on the arguments that it has put, which have now forced the Labour and Liberal Democrat-controlled Kent county council to reign back on the figures that were originally suggested, to the limit of 26,000 proposed by the Conservative group. I hope that our colleagues at the Department of the Environment will carefully note that figure, which Kent county council has now accepted.

I referred to the depredations on the metropolitan green belt of the channel tunnel rail link. When it first burst upon us in 1988, it caused quite devastating fears in the residents of the green belt in the Istead Rise and New Barn areas of my constituency. One of the biggest dangers in the current proposals for the channel tunnel rail link is the proposal that the line of the railway should follow the A2 from west to east, which is the north-south boundary of the metropolitan green belt. The proposed route of the railway line is some hundreds of metres south of the road. There are obvious pressures to take the boundary of the metropolitan green belt further south and line it up with the railway line, bringing urban development between the line of the railway and the line of the road. I believe that the Department of the Environment and all the various planning authorities should stand firm and try to keep the land between the railway and the road strictly agricultural or set to woodland. In no event should it be used for industry or housing, because the environmental conditions would be quite unreasonable.

The channel tunnel rail link will bring the Ebbsfleet international station. That is welcome to my constituents, because it will generate thousands of new jobs and create new transport links, not only to the continent but to London. Commuting to London will be vastly improved; travel times will drop from some 40 minutes at present to 19 minutes when the new station opens. Nevertheless, environmental green belt challenges will arise. The Ebbsfleet water course has many environmental aspects of great value and I assume that up-to-date planning techniques can be used so that the environmental situation of that water course is improved for the benefit of local residents and, especially, wildlife.

My hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge referred to the Warner Brothers theme park idea for his part of Hillingdon. We are not immune to such ideas in north-west Kent—there has been an interesting suggestion that a Las Vegas-style gambling industry should be brought to north-west Kent, and to the Ebbsfleet valley in particular. That is a ludicrous and unwelcome suggestion that is not for us. If the Americans and people in the Caribbean like that sort of thing, they can have it with my blessing.

There is also a site of special scientific interest along the route of the channel tunnel rail link at Ashenbank wood and Cobham park—areas of ancient woodland and Repton landscapes. No mitigation of any value has been proposed against the depredations of the channel tunnel rail link. At one stage, we engaged the interest of the Environment Commissioner of the European Union, but that interest dropped off when we lost our excellent Conservative Member of the European Parliament. His Labour successor has shown no interest in obtaining the environmental grants that we were pursuing. I believe that Ashenbank wood and Cobham park should be considered in terms of conservation.

The pressure of roads on the metropolitan green belt is, in many ways, the most insidious way of smashing up the green belt. Housing can be fought off but, somehow, roads, because they are public, seem to be immune to all the planning safeguards.

In the area of north-west Kent that I represent, the greatest threats come from the Medway roads that are being proposed and the lower Thames crossing proposal. We all know about the M25 and the pressures on it. We know also that those pressures are steadily percolating to create a further massive road, the outer London orbital. The logic that lies behind the pressures is obvious. When we ask the Department of Transport or Kent county council's highways department whether there are plans to construct an outer London orbital motorway, the answer is a categorical no, but at the same time there are various proposals, including the Wainscott bypass and the Leybourne bypass, which would be further south in Kent. Against that background, we begin to see the skeleton of the outer London orbital appearing out of the mists. I urge future generations to watch out. There is something afoot. One of the clearest signs that that is so is the proposal for a lower Thames crossing.

Where would a lower Thames crossing come ashore on the Kent banks? I fear, as do my constituents, that there is perverse logic in the minds of planners to bring the crossing ashore just to the east of the great urban conurbation of Gravesend and Northfleet. Although we see our green belt and green fields to the east of Gravesend as essentially green, many highway planners seem to see them as white empty land across which they can force their motorways—there being few residents to protest. I am worried by the enthusiasm of the county council's highways department for the crossing project.

The county councillor for the Gravesham rural division proposed, in a motion to the council, that the council should oppose any lower Thames crossing that would bring its roads across the green belt immediately east of Gravesend. The motion was voted down by the Labour and Liberal Democrat groups that control the county council. That is an extremely bad omen. My constituents

[Mr. Jacques Arnold]

in Riverview park and Chalk should pay close attention to it. An outer London orbital road should not come into the area.

Furthermore, there is the danger of the proposed Wainscott bypass, which to date has been fought off. We are, however, in the last stages of the rearguard action. If the bypass is constructed, it will cross the metropolitan green belt in the parishes of Higham and Shorne. That would effectively break the last green lung between the Greater London conurbation and the Medway towns.

The danger of the proposed Wainscott bypass goes way beyond breaking the green lung to which I have referred. It would also aid the development of the Hoo peninsula, which has wonderful countryside, including marshlands, which provide a staging post during the migration of the many bird colonies that pass through on their way from the arctic to southern Europe and on to Africa. We must preserve nature in all these areas. My further concern is that the Wainscott bypass would act as a magnet for the outer London orbital road, with its lower Thames crossing.

The debate has been extremely important. The metropolitan green belt is the greatest heritage that previous generations have handed down to those of us who have the privilege to live in the south-east. We must defend the area against housing and the depredations of highway infrastructures. Those who live in the metropolitan green belt areas and adjacent urban areas look to the House to protect them.

12.3 pm

Mr. Keith Vaz (Leicester, East): I congratulate the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Sir M. Shersby) on securing the debate. His efforts on behalf of the green belt are widely respected. As he told the House, he has been president of the London Green Belt Council since 1989.

Anyone who doubts the value of the debate should have listened to the contribution of the hon. Member for Gravesham (Mr. Arnold). Had I not heard it from his own lips, I would never have believed that the hon. Gentleman was once a student at the London School of Economics and that he spends Sunday afternoons walking through the marshes of Gravesend. His contribution was extremely well received and I, for one, listened to it with great care.

Unlike the hon. Member for Uxbridge, however, the hon. Member for Gravesham failed to note the contribution that the Labour party has made to the development of green belt policy. The Labour party has long supported the concept of green belt protection. Indeed, as the hon. Member for Uxbridge said, it was a Labour Government, through the Town and Country Planning Act 1947, who allowed local authorities to incorporate green belt proposals in their first development plans.

Labour today believes that the need for the green belt is still as great. Planning policy should be based on strategic considerations agreed through the appropriate local democratic processes and taking into account national guidance.

Many Members on both sides of the House may have cause to regret the shortcomings of post-war planning, but it is useful to stand back and compare our planning system with those which prevail in many other countries, where urban sprawl knows no limits, where rural landscapes have become dotted with building plots, offices and factories, without any rhyme or reason and often with no coherence between development and necessary infrastructure. Our planning system may be in need of renewal and reform—it should become more accessible to ordinary people, and it should also be a quicker and more cost-effective process—but it still compares well with the systems to be found in other countries. The green belt policy has become a central and vital feature.

The essential characteristic of green belts is their permanence. The House will know that 12 per cent. of England is now covered by them. That is almost one eighth of the country. Department of the Environment planning policy guidance note No. 2 lays down five sensible purposes for including land in green belts. First, there is the need to check the unrestricted sprawl of large, built-up urban areas. Secondly, we must prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another. Thirdly, there is a need to safeguard the countryside from encroachment. Fourthly, we must preserve the setting and special character of historic towns. Fifthly, and finally, there is the need to assist urban regeneration by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

It is right that there must be a strong presumption against inappropriate development. In the planning review that I have launched, Labour will be considering ways of encouraging both the extension and the strengthening of the green belts. What I have to say about green belt land also applies to conservation areas. While the hon. Member for Gravesham was walking from the village of Chalk to the Gravesham marshes, I spent Sunday afternoon with my wife and son walking through the Bedfordshire countryside. There is an extraordinary proposal from a developer to use part of a conservation area in and around mid-Bedfordshire for an industrial development. It is extremely important that we ensure that green fields, green belt and surrounding areas are protected, and not only because they enable city dwellers like myself and others to enjoy the countryside. It is vital, too, that they constitute an essential part of our policy.

Two key national factors must be taken into account in reviewing planning policy to assist Britain in facing the new challenges of the next century. First, no Government or local authority can ignore the need for economic development that will enhance our competitiveness, especially in those areas where the United Kingdom has the energy, talent, skills and creativity to be a world leader. Secondly, the planning restrictions should be balanced against the equally important objective of encouraging the use of public transport. Here in London, those considerations are particularly important.

I note what the hon. Member for Uxbridge said about the Movie World application. I should not like the debate, the hon. Gentleman's speech or, indeed, my own speech to be seen as an attack on the importance of the country's film and television production. I note that in the parliamentary guide the hon. Gentleman lists cinema as one of his interests. We should be proud that our country plays a leading role in film and television production. Anyone who has visited the museum of London's excellent exhibition on the history of the film industry will be well aware of the strategic location of many film studios in the west London area. Such issues will be of

concern to all London residents, and no doubt that will be taken into consideration if and when a public inquiry is held.

Planning policy needs to be dynamic. Since my appointment to my present post, I have said many times, in many different forums, that it is extremely important for planning policy not to operate as a policy in its own right; it should be the servant of other objectives. It should be a way of ensuring that much can be achieved without a penny of taxpayers' money being spent. Opposition Members do not want taxpayers to be burdened, and one way of preventing that is to make the planning system operate as a servant of policy. In a few weeks' time I shall publish my review of planning policy, and I hope that it will include a number of the points that I have made today—and, indeed, a number of the points made by the hon. Member for Uxbridge. I think that he is entirely right, despite the attempts of his hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham to make party-political capital out of the situation. I believe that there is, and ought to be, an all-party approach to protecting the green belt.

The Labour party will soon publish its proposals for a sustainable transport policy, aimed at making public transport more efficient and accessible and giving local people incentives to switch from cars to other forms of transport for employment and leisure purposes. Our green belt policy cannot be pursued in isolation from that essential objective. Green belt land varies tremendously, from historic woodland and villages to the recreation land and wasteland that is now in the middle of urban areas. What was appropriate green belt land just after the war should not necessarily be classified in the same way today. Indeed, the hon. Gentleman's constituency, in the borough of Hillingdon, now contains 50 more acres of green belt than it previously did. I am sure that he welcomes that.

I am not in a position to comment directly on the Movie World proposal—on which the hon. Gentleman, as a constituency Member, rightly dwelt. I am not aware of any secret meetings between councillors and developers. Indeed, I find it strange that the hon. Gentleman should describe them as secret, given that they were mentioned, apparently at length, in the *Uxbridge Gazette*.

Sir Michael Shersby: The secret meetings took place over a long period. The article in the *Uxbridge Gazette* was not published until February this year. Many months elapsed while the meetings were taking place. The Labour group on the council—let alone the Conservatives and local residents—knew nothing of them. That is all in the *Uxbridge Gazette*, a copy of which I have in my hand.

Mr. Vaz: If it is in the *Uxbridge Gazette*, no doubt it must be true.

The hon. Gentleman gave us a timetable. He was told about the proposals on 7 February 1996, the *Uxbridge Gazette* was told on 8 February 1996 and the Labour group was told on 9 February 1996. The article appeared in the paper two days later. I think that the hon. Gentleman was fortunate to be consulted five days before the piece appeared in the local newspaper. I do not know about the Minister, but I get to know about events in my local council after they have featured in the *Leicester Mercury*.

Questions that should be asked about the development include questions about the nature of the current land use, the economic development benefits and examination of alternative sites, if any, public transport considerations and what, if any, strategic considerations there are for London and the United Kingdom as a whole in relation to the film industry and tourism. Account must also be taken of public opinion in the immediate vicinity and more widely. I note what the hon. Gentleman said about that. An action group has been formed, and a number of formidable groups are affiliated to it. I am sure that they will express their views. One of those groups has already written to me, and I have written back stating, in similar terms, that I cannot intervene.

To be successful, any application must show the existence of exceptional circumstances that justify the presumption against green-belt development. I have made our position clear. Wider strategic conditions must also be taken into account, but we must also be firm in our resolve to stop any further outward growth of cities and conurbations, and the merging of neighbouring towns. All those are matters for due process in the planning procedures, in which the genuine concerns of local residents can be balanced against national and regional considerations.

The hon. Member for Uxbridge was right to raise the matter at this stage. He is clearly very concerned about it. He was also right, however, to remind the House that no planning application has been made. The Minister has not had an opportunity to consider the matter in his quasi-judicial capacity, but I am sure that, in time, the House and the country will hear much more about the proposal.

12.15 pm

The Minister for Construction, Planning and Energy Efficiency (Mr. Robert B. Jones): I join other hon. Members in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge (Sir M. Shersby) on securing the debate, and on choosing such an important subject. As president of the London Green Belt Council, he has an interest that extends far beyond his constituency. As one who comes from that area, I know how long he has been committed to the green belt. I was also pleased to see that my hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman)—my hon. Friend's predecessor as president of the London Green Belt Council—was present for his speech. That illustrates Conservatives' commitment to the green belt in general.

When I was elected as a Member of Parliament in 1983, I was fortunate enough to be appointed as a member of the Select Committee on the Environment, on which I continued to serve until I eventually became its Chairman. The first inquiry that the Committee conducted after I became a member was on the green belt and planning policy. The then Clerk to the Committee was one Reg Hobden, who I note has now surfaced again as one of the activists in the Hillingdon House Farm Action Committee. I am delighted that Mr. Hobden retains such an active interest in environmental matters, and I think that local residents are lucky to have such a talented and articulate exponent of their views.

The hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) cited a number of objectives for green belt policy. One—I think that it was the fifth on his list—was the objective of encouraging regeneration and the use of derelict land. That was a recommendation of the Environment Select Committee, which shows how valuable such Committees can be to policy-making and to the House as a whole.

[Mr. Robert B. Jones]

My hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge may be interested to know that I spent my youth in the London borough of Hillingdon, and I vividly remember the lido, Mad Bess woods and, of course, Harefield, which is one of the few genuinely rural communities left in the Greater London area—although, as I drove through it the other day, I noted with some sadness that there seems to be a great deal of urban sprawl there. Anyone who is associated in any way with the London borough of Hillingdon must be aware that, whenever Labour is in control there, the environment goes out of the window. I need say only two words, "Alderman Bartlett".

My hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge asked me to be robust about green belts. I certainly want to be so, since they are a cornerstone of our town and country planning system, and have been for more than 40 years. In those 40 years, many things have changed. Continued economic growth has led to rising prosperity and far greater pressures on the environment. Now, more than ever, we need to remember that we hold the environment in trust for future generations, and must therefore take planning and other decisions wisely.

Green belts are popular at home and, I find, widely admired abroad. Since 1979, green belt land has more than doubled, and now covers 12 per cent. of England—3.8 million acres. The essential characteristic of green belts is their longevity. Their protection must be maintained as far as can be seen ahead. Recent research carried out for my Department confirmed the effectiveness of green belts in preventing urban sprawl and safeguarding the countryside from encroachment. It found that boundary alterations had affected less than 0.3 per cent. of green belts in eight years. The planning appeals system strongly upheld the principle of green belts. Most planning permission has been given for small-scale changes that have not significantly affected the open appearance and character of green belt land.

The research recommended a number of refinements to make the policy even more effective. We consulted on those and last year published a revised version of planning policy guidance note No. 2. Our aim was to strengthen the policy, learning from the experience of the past 40 years, and to leave it in even better shape to face the challenges of the next century. The limited changes that we made take greater account of environmental and economic factors and remedy some practical difficulties in operating the policy, without compromising in any way the protection given to green belts.

The revised PPG2 reaffirms the strict control over development in green belts and maintains the presumption against inappropriate development. It advises how green belts can contribute to sustainable development objectives by shaping the pattern of urban development. It encourages proper consideration of the long-term direction of development. It provides for the future of existing major developed sites in a way that can secure environmental benefits. For the first time, it sets out positive objectives for the use of land in green belts.

The Government are committed to sustainable development. Green belts can play an important part in that, by helping to shape patterns of urban development at regional and sub-regional scale and ensuring that development occurs in locations allocated in development plans. The restrictions placed on building in green belts are complemented by policies that encourage the optimum use of land in urban areas, the reclamation of derelict land, the release of unused land owned by local authorities and other public bodies, and by grants and incentives to developers willing to tackle difficult or derelict sites in inner cities. For example, there are many acres of redundant and under-used land in east London, and the redevelopment of it can take the pressure off green field sites. Reusing such land with urban regeneration will reduce the pressure for development in the open countryside and especially in the green belt.

The London green belt is one of the capital's greatest assets. It has a historic significance, dating from legislation before the second world war. Despite the strong development pressure from the conurbation, the metropolitan green belt has successfully prevented the encroachment of London into its surrounding countryside. Nor do I underestimate the role of metropolitan open land, which is recognised as land of more than a borough significance, generally because of its size and catchment area.

We shall shortly publish revised strategic guidance for London's planning authorities. It will maintain the strong presumption against inappropriate development in green belts and provide a London perspective on national green belt policy. The boroughs will be asked to set out strategic policies for the long-term future of the green belt and to support efforts to improve its environmental quality. The guidance will also emphasise the importance of metropolitan open land. It will stress that such land should not be used for developments that compromise its open character and value to London's setting. I should make it clear that there is a clear presumption against inappropriate development of metropolitan land of equal status to that in the green belt.

In London and areas of the home counties, parts of the metropolitan green belt are afforded additional safeguards under the Green Belt (London and Home Counties) Act 1938. That Act was particularly pertinent at a time when ownership of land was the only way in which to limit its use to purposes appropriate in a green belt. Since then, sufficient protection has evolved under the planning system, so that public ownership is no longer seen as the main method of safeguarding the green belt. There are very few occasions on which local authorities need to resort to buying land to protect the green belt.

Nevertheless, each application under the 1938 Act for ministerial consent to the disposal of land will continue to be examined very carefully and treated on its merits. Publicity must be given for proposals to dispose of land under the Act. The Secretary of State takes account of any objections that are received. One of the factors that will certainly be taken into account when considering any such application is whether retention of the land in public ownership is necessary or desirable as a means of securing green belt objectives.

Except in very special circumstances, the construction of new buildings in green belts is undesirable unless it falls within a very limited number of categories, which include agriculture and forestry, essential facilities for outdoor sport and outdoor recreation, cemeteries, and other uses of land that preserve the openness of the green belt.

The reuse of buildings, however, should not compromise the openness of green belts, since the buildings are already there. The alternative to reuse might be a building being left vacant and prone to dereliction. Reuse can help to secure the continuing stewardship of land. Conversions of buildings in green belts are subject to stringent safeguards, which preserve the openness and character of the land and require careful consideration of the environmental and traffic implications of the new use.

There are some substantial major developed sites in green belts, such as pre-war factories and power stations. Often, they predate the green belt. Some are in continuing use and some are redundant. Our guidelines enable local authorities to make realistic provision for their futures in their development-plan policies, but in such a way as to secure environmental benefits. That is good for the green belt and good for the economy.

Development that does not fall in those limited categories of development is inappropriate in green belts. It is necessary for the developer to demonstrate very special circumstances to justify permission for such development. Very special circumstances will not exist unless the harm by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm, is clearly outweighed by other considerations. Such circumstances are not easily demonstrated.

There may be instances where the Secretary of State requires a planning application to be referred to him for decision. Our policy on call-ins is to be very selective. In general, proposals will be called in only if they raise planning issues of more than local importance. Examples include applications that could have wide effects beyond their immediate area, give rise to substantial controversy nationally or locally, or conflict with national policy on important matters. My hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge will know that some applications in his borough have been called in on precisely those grounds.

I should like to turn to the specific points that my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge made. The first related to the motorway service area at Iver. I can tell him that the inquiry into that is to be reopened, but no date has yet been announced. I should also like to comment on the proposals of Warner Brothers and Clive Hollick's—of the Labour party—MAI plc for a theme park and film studios at Hillingdon House farm in Uxbridge, on which many of my hon. Friend's remarks focused. The proposals have received extensive coverage in the press and correspondence, particularly from my hon. Friend's constituents.

I understand that Hillingdon House farm is a site of 60 hectares in the metropolitan green belt, which is currently used for recreational purposes, including a ski slope, football pitches, cricket pitches and open countryside. The proposed theme park would use all the land, although part of the film studios would be located on the non-green belt part of the site.

At present, no planning application for the proposed theme park and film studios has been lodged with the London borough of Hillingdon. Therefore, it is not possible for the Secretary of State to consider whether to intervene and exercise his power of call-in under section 77 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. Furthermore, I am certain that my hon. Friend will understand that I cannot comment on the proposals' merits, because to do so would prejudice the Secretary of State's consideration of the matter should any application be referred to him.

The debate has been very useful. I think that all hon. Members are united in a commitment to the green belt. Our policy on green belt forms part of a sound framework for the continued protection and enjoyment of open space around our cities, which will serve us well into the 21st century and beyond. I am sure that that is the view of my hon. Friends and their constituents, and I commend such an approach to the House.

Green Commuter Plan (Nottingham)

12.28 pm

Mr. Graham Allen (Nottingham, North): The purpose of the debate is to ask the Secretary of State for Transport what the Government will do to support and spread the word about the imaginative and innovative green commuter plan in Nottingham. There is nothing technical or complicated about it: it involves the sensible encouragement of car use and sharing, and it is backed by a little common sense and organisation. It is a pioneering innovation, which I hope the outgoing Government will support in their last months. I hope that they will also use their currently undemocratic regional offices to spread that example throughout the United Kingdom.

Already, the east midlands central office of the Government has abandoned its pith helmet, its khaki shorts and its donkey, and has started to look at a commuter plan for its staff. The councillors and officers of Nottingham city council and Nottinghamshire county council deserve immense credit for piloting this new venture and for taking a risk on a bright idea.

We know how unpleasant the fumes and congestion caused by traffic can be, but Nottingham has underlined a more serious economic side to congestion. Millions of pounds in time and resources are wasted as people sit in fumes and car congestion in and around Nottingham. For a city such as this, that represents a serious drain on resources and productivity which it can do without.

The work of the city and county councils to regenerate the local economy would be seriously hampered if the city were to grind to a halt as traffic continued to grow, quite apart from the dreadful consequences of air pollution and traffic accidents. The worst congestion in Nottingham, as in many other places, is at rush hour, and reducing the impact of commuter traffic has been the councils' first priority. The councils have done much to improve transport in the city, but Nottingham has realised that the key to reducing car commuting is the involvement of employers and employees, and that that is where commuter plans have a part to play.

I am bringing this matter to the attention of the House and the Minister because the Nottingham example provides a valuable lesson for Government and Parliament. It is an initiative that the Department of Transport must support more solidly, not just in Nottingham but in the many other towns and cities where rush hour traffic and congestion damage the local economy. The answer is not the slashing of 20 per cent. from local transport budgets or more ludicrous, lottery-style competitions between local authorities for ever smaller pots of money, but real support from the centre for local initiatives.

Around the world, sensible commuting is catching on. Los Angeles has introduced a diamond lane, where only cars with more than one person are allowed. However, I understand that, with typical ingenuity, the trade in blow-up dolls has considerably expanded. It also uses commuter plans and car sharing schemes, which come into force when air quality falls below acceptable levels, as another way to tackle the consequences of traffic jams which are the cause of pollution.

I shall explain in more detail the way in which the city and county councils in Nottingham are approaching the problem. Both councils have agreed that it is essential to lead by example, and are adopting commuter plans for their staffs. The county council's "Steps" programme is already well established. Councillor Denis Petit, the leader of the county council, told me, "We could hardly ask others to do something that we had not done ourselves, so we took the lead with this 'Steps' initiative."

The county council and the city council have produced a resource pack, which has been spread far and wide throughout the city and which encourages local employers to follow the example that has been set by the councils. It has taken off with a vengeance. Boots, Nottingham Trent university, Queen's medical centre, Clarendon college, the City hospital, CCN and many other local employers have taken up the initiative in their own way, and are organising their own versions of the green commuter plan.

Like so many of our continental partners, Nottingham is proving that much can be done by each employer to encourage employees to walk, cycle, use public transport, work from home or share cars. That must and can be done not by using big brother attitudes, but by offering people encouragement and the opportunity to change their habits when that suits them. We in Britain seem slightly embarrassed to act in this social or solidarity manner. Only when we confront that problem will we be able to take serious action at local level.

Many companies already offer loans to help with the purchase of cars, and such schemes could easily be adapted to include loans for the purchase of cycles or public transport travel cards. Local transport plans, which will be introduced by an incoming Labour Government, will make provision and help set targets for such achievements, and will encourage the use of such green commuter plans.

Organising car sharing schemes can put people in touch with others who make similar journeys to work every day; that not only saves on traffic and pollution, but saves people money and is more sociable. The main reason why many people do not share cars at the moment is that they do not know with whom they can share. Work by employers and councils to put people in touch with each other through databases and post code coffee clubs, and the provision of a guarantee of emergency travel home can have a dramatic and immediate effect on the amount of traffic in a given locality.

Examples in continental Europe show how that can have a significant impact on local traffic. Schemes such as the Bremen Stadt Auto car sharing plan in Germany provide models for such work, and it is being taken up by Labour councils in the UK, notably in Edinburgh. In the Netherlands, 2,400 companies are now co-operating in car sharing schemes, and already there has been a 15 per cent. reduction in car commuting.

Nottingham has proved that some people need cars during their working day, but that that does not necessarily mean that they have to drive their cars to work. For example, Nottinghamshire health authority offers pool cars for essential car users. Four cars cover the needs of 150 people who might otherwise have had to drive to work. Similar savings are being made by the city council using local taxi firms.

The city also provides a great example by its proposals for the new ice stadium, which was made famous by Torvill and Dean, by experimenting with alternatives to on-site parking, and by the issue of free park-and-ride tickets to those who buy stadium tickets. Those are

innovative and imaginative ways in which people coming together on a small scale can try to tackle the problems that are caused by traffic congestion.

Big employers can encourage their staff to use public transport by negotiating with local operators to secure bulk discounts for travelcards. Nottingham city council runs a successful scheme, which provides staff with discounted bus travel. Another important success by the councils is cycling. Their partnership with local employers has started to produce results, although much more can be done. The Queen's medical centre and Nottingham Trent university are starting schemes to encourage cycling, and others are expected to follow shortly.

As well as loans for the purchase of cycles and the provision of secure parking, employers can negotiate bulk discounts on insurance or offer travel allowances. As recently as yesterday, Nottingham city council agreed to approve a bicycle allowance scheme offering 15p a mile to council staff. As we speak, more new initiatives are being introduced to tackle the serious problems in the city.

The two councils have also demonstrated the importance of facilities at work. They include not only secure cycle parking but showers and changing facilities. I used to cycle to the House many years ago, but I had to give it up because I felt so filthy when I arrived, and there were no adequate shower facilities. Given the inadequate facilities that are available here, perhaps the Serjeant at Arms will consider that in more detail.

Businesses in Nottingham are also being asked to consider teleworking and flexible working hours. They, too, can help to reduce rush hour congestion, as well as bring other unrelated benefits to companies and to employees. In that context, we need to consider schools, which, in recent years, as the Minister well knows, have been one of the most significant contributors to the massive rise in peak-time commuting. That problem needs to be dealt with, perhaps by considering school green commuter plans. Young people are often the most active environmentalists. Perhaps they could devise their own plans at their schools.

The success of Nottingham's project, still in its early stages, is already impressive. The employers I have mentioned, including Boots and CCN, are taking an active interest. The breakthrough that has been achieved in Nottingham is such that companies have been persuaded that helping to tackle traffic problems is in their economic interests. Better traffic flow is good for business, and reduces business costs. Providing a parking space at work, for example, costs £300 per year in maintenance costs alone. For a company wanting to expand its operations, reducing parking requirements can provide valuable new development space.

Companies have also found that commuter plans are popular with staff, can reduce stress and improve morale. The company can save money even on car allowances. It is one of those equations where, if everyone works together—employer, employee, city and county councils—everyone can win.

The benefits to Nottingham are potentially huge. Typical commuter plans aim to cut car commuting in each company by 30 per cent. If successful, that will transform our city, and it could transform other cities likewise. Given such potential and value for money, we might have thought that the Government would be a little more enthusiastic about commuter plans, encouraging councils and companies all over Britain to join, but it has taken the ground-breaking work of Labour local authorities, especially Nottingham city council and Nottinghamshire county council, to bring this project to the attention of people everywhere.

Nottinghamshire county council is co-ordinating an information exchange network to encourage similar schemes elsewhere. Good for it, but perhaps the Government and the Department of Transport could take on that role. I call on the Minister to give his public support to the Nottingham green commuter plans and to issue guidance, further to policy planning guidance 13 and PPG 6, to local authorities to encourage them to work with local businesses to reduce traffic and to review their parking policies.

As Graham Chapman, leader of Nottingham city council, has told me:

"Green commuter plans, helpful as they are, cannot be viewed in isolation. To be effective they must be linked to Local Transport Plans, Bus re-regulation, a strategy for Light Rapid Transits and Park and Ride".

Green commuter plans are but one part of the jigsaw we need to create to answer modern traffic problems.

Just the other week, we had the warm words and complacency, unfortunately, of the Government's Green Paper on transport. Why were commuter plans not convincingly expounded, backed and promoted in that document? Instead, Government policies continue to make it more and more difficult to achieve progress. Rail privatisation, like bus deregulation before it, is producing a disintegrated service, when we need an integrated transport system. That is hampering the efforts of employers to negotiate bulk discounts for public transport fares for their employees to help to tackle the problem.

Sadly, the Government have been free with their empty congratulations for Nottingham and its commuter plans. It is now time to replace that with serious action to spread awareness of that success throughout the country and to spread that best practice. Nottingham has led on green commuter plans, and the Government—if not this one, then the next—should encourage councils everywhere to build on Nottingham's example.

12.44 pm

The Minister for Transport in London (Mr. Steve Norris): I congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen) on having secured the debate, and especially on his ingenuity in using Back-Bench Members' time for his departmental interests—always a clever technique if hon. Members can get away with it, and amply demonstrated today.

Of course I share the hon. Gentleman's enthusiasm for green commuter plans. I have met all the local political leaders in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire, and know them well—the chief officers, too. I have much respect for what they do. I never imagined that this was territory for party political nit-picking—although, if we are going to pick some nits, let me just say that, if the hon. Gentleman has concerns about the complacency of the Government's Green Paper on transport policy, it is in extraordinary contrast to the utter debacle that represents Labour transport policy.

When my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport and I pointed out that the draft document that became available to us amounted to a bombshell for every

[Mr. Steve Norris]

person shopping in every supermarket in Britain, that it was profoundly anti-car and anti-motorist, and that it was laced throughout with liberal helpings of sheer politics of envy, what did the Opposition do but instantly withdraw the document, deny any authorship, claim that it had all been a put-up job by Transport 2000—with which they are normally only too keen to be seen to be associated—and say vaguely that something was due and that it would be exciting?

As ever with the Opposition, they were saying nothing. If we are in the business of trading mild insults on an otherwise perfectly harmonious occasion such as this, nothing characterises Labour transport policy so much as the utter absence of commitment to any principle in relation to transport fiscal policy or planning policy.

I note, incidentally, an extraordinary proposition advanced by the hon. Gentleman. He alleges that regional offices are "currently undemocratic". I imagine that currently undemocratic implies, in his fevered imagination, that, at some point, they should become democratic. That is an extraordinary proposition, when one reflects on the fact that Government offices are a sensible arrangement whereby leading Departments of State combine their efforts in a region to ensure that optimum efficiencies are obtained from the scarce taxpayer resources that are devoted to that region. Government offices have been spectacularly successful throughout the country.

During the course of my duties, I have had the advantage of being able to visit all the regions, and I have noticed the extent to which all the regional offices—incidentally, the Government office for the east midlands is no exception—have become genuine champions of the regions they represent. That has been of huge value.

Conservative Members will wish to consider more carefully the cloud no bigger than a man's hand that is soon to cover the hon. Gentleman's sky of a democratic regional office. When we do, the proposition will be instantly withdrawn, like all the other propositions he advances.

The hon. Gentleman always uses the expression, "outgoing Government". It gives me great pleasure to assure him that the next Government will continue to promote the policies that Conservative Members believe are appropriate for dealing with urban congestion and pollution issues—largely because the Government will be composed of my right hon. and hon. Friends. I am clear that they at least have an urban congestion strategy that is coherent, manageable and politically practical, and that avoids all the dangers and pitfalls into which the Labour party has so timely fallen. Those pitfalls involve presenting itself as anti-car, anti-motorist and, frankly, anti-anything but the brown rice and open-toed sandal society with which the Labour party so often appears to associate itself.

Having said that, I shall return to the theme of the green commuter plan for Nottingham, in which there is a great deal that is admirable and worth supporting. As the hon. Gentleman knows when he talks about practical support beyond exhortation, the traditional means available to us are the transport supplementary grant and the allocation of resources under that heading, which takes place on the basis of the transport policy plans presented to us each year. We in turn offer guidance to local authorities on how they may prepare those plans.

As the hon. Gentleman's learning curve is beginning to accelerate—some years behind, admittedly, but there is much joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, and I have great hopes for him—he will know that the way in which we allocate the resources is currently centred on the package approach to local transport planning. In all seriousness, he and I both recognise that that is how we must proceed if we want to develop a coherent local strategy.

As the hon. Gentleman correctly said, the key to the package approach is to take an environmentally sensitive attitude not only towards the role of the local authority and the other traditional components of the strategy, such as the bus operators and other transport undertakings, but towards that of businesses and individuals. We regard local authorities not only as transport authorities but as large employers and large presences in towns and cities. As such, they are members of the partnership that the hon. Gentleman correctly identifies as one that we need to engender locally.

I suggest that the practical way forward is to try to incorporate more of the idea of producing a holistic green commuter plan into our approach to our transport policy plan guidance in future, and, when we determine our expenditure priorities, to allocate whatever absolute level of resources there may be more in accordance with that basis.

When I spoke to all the local authorities in the regional consultative committees that meet every year—I have just completed this year's round—I told them that we tended to address two basic issues. The first is the absolute quantum of money. There, as ever, we are driven by the macro-economic requirements of the national economy. The second is what priority we give within the resources that we may have available.

In that connection, there is no doubt that the shift of emphasis towards the package approach over the past four years has been hugely helpful in achieving better value for the money we have.

Mr. Allen *rose—*

Mr. Norris: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will not mind if I continue, because, so consumed was I by his unique theory of the management of local regional government, that I have not yet started the speech that I intended to make.

Mr. Allen *rose—*

Mr. Norris: As it is the hon. Gentleman's debate, however, if he wishes to intervene he may by all means do so.

Mr. Allen: The Minister is typically generous, but he was also typically inaccurate in his opening remarks. I shall pass quickly over the first five minutes of his speech, and talk about Nottingham's green commuter plan.

As the Government may have one more round of TPPs and discussions with local authorities about their local transport spending, will the Minister consider issuing

some sort of guidance, or even making it clear in a public speech that he would like local authorities to consider the concept of green commuter plans, and will look with favour on their bids should those include something similar to the Nottingham example?

Mr. Norris: We have just finalised the TPP guidance for the financial year 1997-98, which will soon be issued to local authorities so that they can get the flavour of what we shall look for in that settlement. As the hon. Gentleman said, that is likely to follow on before the expiry of this Parliament.

The hon. Gentleman will see that, in that guidance, we have continued to accent our interest in developing the package approach. Many of the themes he has mentioned are contained within the guidance—rightly so, because the bones that he has identified are the right ones. The recent Green Paper acknowledged that traffic growth, and its impact on congestion and environmental pollution, is fundamental to the way in which we shall develop our strategies in future.

There is growing concern about the effect on people's health, the environment and the economy of the uncontrolled use of the car. People are more likely to take responsible transport decisions if they are well informed and know more about the full implications of those decisions. Recognising that, several local authorities are operating schemes to raise public awareness of the impact of travel, both on congestion and on the environment. The Travelwise scheme first developed by Hertfordshire is an excellent example of how to develop just such a policy, and there have also been examples from other counties.

The responses to the national debate showed that the effect on air quality is the environmental impact that causes most concern. The Green Paper sets out the Government's strategy for reducing pollution from transport, taking account of the national air quality strategy that will be published as part of the implementation of the Environment Act 1995.

The strategy will set the policy framework for tackling pollution from all sources, including transport. It will set standards for the pollutants of most concern, and a time frame for meeting those standards, and will set out the measures that will be needed. The Government will play their part at national level—for example, by continuing to press for tighter vehicle emissions limits and enforcement measures.

It is recognised that, as we earlier agreed, there will be a key role for local authorities, companies and individuals. We believe that commuter plans such as that developed by Nottingham should be welcomed, and could have an important contribution to make. What I like about Nottingham's green commuter plan is the fact that it is a citywide initiative involving the county, the city, Nottingham Green Partnership, Transport 2000 and several other local organisations that have already shown a willingness to be involved.

The scheme has two cardinal benefits—benefit for the organisations involved, and benefit for the environment. In discussing the matter with people such as Adrian Jones and Lynn Sloman of Transport 2000, who came to see me to discuss the Nottingham plan before its publication, one of the aspects that I have always found attractive is the fact that the organisations and their employees are the ones who benefit from a healthier life style, and from the reduction in the stress associated with car commuting.

Businesses, as distinct from their employees, also benefit from the release of land for more productive use, and, depending on the level of subsidy paid to car users and in rental for car parking spaces, can make significant financial savings that can be reallocated to the promotion of more sustainable forms of transport. Last but not least, the green commuter plans demonstrate by practical example how a greener transport strategy can be implemented by a major employer, whether that be a local authority or a private sector firm.

As the hon. Member said, there are obvious gains for the environment, too. The eventual outcome of the plan in Nottingham will be less traffic in the city centre, and a reduction not only in congestion and in traffic emissions but, as a by-product, in accidents. The publicised support for public transport cannot but be welcomed, and if green commuter plans help to release road space, allowing for extensions to existing bus and cycle networks, that will be a bonus.

The model that Nottingham has produced is one that many other organisations can follow. It is immensely gratifying that organisations such as Boots, Nottingham university and the Queen's medical centre have also been encouraged to provide green commuter plans. The overall target of such plans is to cut car commuting journeys by 30 per cent. in the initial three-year period, and experience from elsewhere, such as that in the Netherlands, shows that that can be done.

The feat will not be easy, but if we can develop model plans from the Netherlands and the United States of America, and think in terms of the central role of a staff travel co-ordinator—in corporate terms, that is essential, to keep the profile of such schemes high in people's minds—it ought to be achievable. With all political sparring to one side, I genuinely believe that, if the plan works, it will be a major achievement for Nottingham, and I look forward to congratulating the city.

Not only are all the partners in Nottingham involved in the scheme, but one of the other important local partners, the Government office for the east midlands, is also prepared to involve itself in a green commuter plan. It has well-managed on-site parking that is restricted to essential users, and has adopted the principle of the pool car. It now has flexible working hours and showering and changing facilities. The Department is prepared to offer interest-free cycle loans as an incentive to take up cycling. All that is laudable.

The Department of Transport's headquarters at Great Minster house is also developing a green commuter plan, which time prevents me from expanding upon in detail. I heartily endorse the comments of the hon. Member for Nottingham, North on the importance of developing a similar plan for the House of Commons. I am not entirely sure whether it is appropriate for me to do so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I commend the remarks of the hon. Gentleman to you. Perhaps the House authorities will look at the *Hansard* report of the debate, and consider how they can develop a plan that will allow this place to provide a blueprint for good practice among major employers.

Enterprise

1 pm

Mr. Anthony Coombs (Wyre Forest): While I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this important matter, I had hoped for a debate of an hour and a half, which would have allowed other Members to speak, including Labour Members. Sadly, the Labour Benches are empty, despite the importance of the subject. We could have heard from Labour about its attitude towards enterprise, which at times appears to be antipathetic.

I wish to talk about the enormous progress that has been made and the transformation that has taken place in the British economy in the past 15 years, and I shall refer to some of the disastrous consequences that would ensue were we ever unwise enough to elect a Labour Government. I also wish to make one or two suggestions as to how enterprise and the enterprise spirit of the British people can be better stimulated.

Despite the importance of the subject and of the message that I want to get across, I must agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Mr. French), who said two months ago that if one wants to keep a secret, the best way to do it is by making a speech on it in the House of Commons. As I shall be describing good news, the press will have very little interest in the debate.

I want to make two points about fostering enterprise in this country. First, enterprise is very easy to take for granted. We have had a growth rate of 40 per cent. in the past 15 years, which translates into more than £80 a week in real terms in additional earnings for a man with two children. That growth rate has resulted in improvements in every section of society. For example, pensioners' incomes have risen slightly higher than the average increase in incomes throughout the country. The increased growth rate has resulted in Britain setting aside some £600 billion in pensions savings and has enabled spending to increase in areas such as education—an increase of 31 per cent. in real terms in the past 15 years—and the national health service, where the increase has been 17 per cent. in real terms, or £700 per person.

Those things do not just happen—they happen as a result of people creating businesses with payrolls, making profits and paying taxes on those profits. That is what funds the welfare state. We cannot make that point too strongly—enterprise is the life-blood of the welfare state. Those people, particularly those involved in the public sector, who constantly demand more resources—never money—for the welfare state would do well to remember that.

Secondly, although enterprise is a sturdy plant, we live in an increasingly competitive world, in parts of which economies are growing in a dynamic fashion, with some experiencing growth rates of 10 per cent. a year while paying between a thirtieth and a third of British wages. Those countries are unencumbered by the social apparatus that affects many western European economies. For those reasons, it is crucial that we maintain our momentum by reducing inflation, increasing tax incentives and continuing the deregulation process so as to add to the natural growth rate of our economy.

Although the growth rate of our economy is significantly greater than that of our European neighbours, adding just 1 per cent. to the natural growth rate would increase available resources by some £7 billion a year. That would go a long way towards fulfilling people's expectations, in terms of both living standards and public services.

I wanted to refer to the transformation that has taken place under this Government, because it is so often taken for granted. When the Conservative party came to power in 1979, Britain was regarded—even by the British ambassador in Paris—as the "sick man of Europe". Since then, there has been a massive transformation.

Geoffrey Dicks, writing in *The Sunday Times* a month ago, said that he had been studying the British economy for the past 30 years, and added:

"on any objective measure of economic performance, the last four years have been as good as, if not better than, any comparable period since my student days."

The president of the German equivalent of the Confederation of British Industry has said that the British economy, of all the European countries, is now the best equipped to deal with what he called

"the challenge of global competitiveness".

Jan Timmer, the head of Philips—a £5 billion-a-year international company—says that the most competitive country in Europe today is the United Kingdom. Bernd Rischestrider, the chairman of BMW, has said that Great Britain is currently the most attractive country in Europe to produce cars.

In its 1995 report, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development complimented Britain on a 3.8 per cent. growth rate—the highest in Europe—on an inflation rate lower than at any time for 27 years and on unemployment falling by about 800,000 in the past two and half years. Unemployment in this country is now, for the first time, consistently and significantly less than in Germany and, obviously, is less than in France and Italy. We have strong net exports and a relatively small current account deficit. Those are the findings of the OECD.

In my constituency, those facts translate into an unemployment level of 6.9 per cent.—a fall of a third since 1992. On small businesses, we should look at the March survey carried out by the Institute of Directors, which reported renewed growth in orders—which had been slowing down—and growth in output, employment and profits, particularly among small firms employing between 10 and 100 people, and particularly in the midlands. Liquidations are decreasing, while the number of new firms is increasing. It is also anticipated that the growth rate for 1996 will be 2.5 per cent., one of the highest in Europe.

The Foundation for Manufacturing and Industry now says that Britain is the best place to manufacture in Europe and is rapidly becoming the enterprise centre of Europe, despite the fact that we often hear Labour arguing that manufacturing is being ignored by the Government.

Given that background, it is surprising that anyone could contemplate a Labour Administration. Labour still appears to be philosophically against enterprise and the profit motive. For example, during yesterday's debate, in which I spoke on renovation grants and the building industry, the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) argued—in what I described as "Castro-esque terms"—for the common ownership of land.

This country must reduce the proportion of its gross national product that goes in tax. Sophisticated economies—such as Switzerland, the United States and

Japan—have successfully created jobs and prosperity, and they take only 29 or 30 per cent. of their GNP in tax. The Labour party wants to move in the opposite direction. Although it ducks and weaves on the issue—in a way that would pay credit to Frank Bruno in his non-fight against Mike Tyson—it wants to increase taxes. Why? Inevitably, the Labour party will spend more because of its involvement with producer interests and because of the huge debts that it will have to repay as a result of the promises that it will make to try to get into power.

For example, recently the Labour party proposed a windfall tax on public utilities. We counted the number of pledges that were covered by that windfall tax in the different spending proposals of different Labour party members and we found that it would be spent 11 times over. When we monitored Labour Members' speeches, we found that 40 per cent. of them made demands for extra spending and extra resources. If hon. Members need further evidence, the hon. Member for Newham, North–West (Mr. Banks)—despite the efforts of the hon. Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown) to appear responsible—recently said:

"at the next election, I do not want to have to tell voters on the doorsteps in East London—people who have voted Labour for generations—that there will be no extra spending to help them."

What will be the result of the Labour party's spending? Taxes will go up—they always do under a Labour Government. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Ms Short) has said that we ought to pay a bit more tax—and we all know what that means. The top rate of tax currently starts at 1.5 times average earnings. The Labour party would increase the tax for the vast majority of middle-income earners from 40 per cent. to 50 per cent. and it would also take away the ceiling for national insurance contributions. There would be a top rate of at least 60 per cent. for middle-income families. Anyone who does not understand that is living in cloud cuckoo land.

The Labour party tries to sugar the pill by talking about something called stakeholding—and we know what effect that would have on enterprise. John Edmonds and John Monks of the trade unions have said that that would give greater power to the trade unions. We know that it would translate into a minimum wage, which is a political sop. It would destroy jobs. It is estimated that a minimum wage of £4.15 would destroy 950,000 jobs nationally and approximately 80,000 in the west midlands. The CBI has estimated that if wage differentials were increased by only half, it would affect hundreds of thousands of firms, particularly small firms. Small firms create jobs and have consistently done so over the past 20 years.

We know of the Labour party's intentions in relation to the social chapter, which will include the part-time work directive, the parental leave directive and the works council directive. The Department of Trade and Industry has estimated that the social chapter will result in £2 billion a year in additional costs—totally unnecessary costs—for British industry. We now have the social chapter opt-out. I think that £2 billion equates to about one sixth of manufacturing profits, so one can see the appalling effect that it would have on investment in this country.

We have heard how the Labour party has decided, cap in hand, to remove child benefit for those aged over 16. That will cost the average family approximately £1,000 for the first child who takes A-levels. If the Labour party thinks that that is a good way to encourage young people to stay at school, its economic policy is even more illogical than I suspected it to be. In a different context, Lord Hailsham said:

"If the British public falls for this, I say it will be stark staring bonkers."

Frankly, the public would be stark staring bonkers to believe this. The Labour party has to reveal its plans as we move towards the next general election, and the British people will agree with Lord Hailsham.

I shall make one or two suggestions as to how we can continue to promote enterprise and competitiveness in this country. Promoting enterprise is not just a one-off event; it is a continuous process, and the Government must be vigilant. There are economic and moral arguments for lower tax—it would leave people with more money in their pockets, which they could spend better and more wisely for their families than would a bureaucrat in Whitehall or in their local town hall. Lower taxation is needed to promote enterprise. For example, the Institute of Directors recently conducted a survey of its own small business men. It stated:

"But the clear message is that small businessmen believe that the present level of taxes on their business activities seriously hinders their ability to grow their businesses."

One of the reasons is that the present tax structure—forget about the rates—militates against retained profits rather than distributed profits, particularly as it relates to income tax for those who are self-employed. The United Kingdom has a large public company sector and our relative level of dividend payments as a proportion of post-tax profits is high—in the region of 38 to 40 per cent. We need to address that.

The Tax Law Review Committee, established by the Inland Revenue, has recognised that the present tax system is horrendously complex—and made more so, too often, by allowances that are meant to deal with particular problems without taking the axe to the Gordian knot. There are no fewer than six volumes of income tax legislation and 408 pages of capital gains tax legislation. Therefore, we ought to take an axe to the tax law to see whether it can be simplified. We should try to amalgamate national insurance contributions and pay-as-you-earn tax—that would be simpler for small companies and for individuals who create jobs.

For too long, we have pretended that we shall reduce capital gains tax or eliminate it altogether, but we have not done so. It is a tax on wealth creation and on family companies, which reinvest their profits in a way that public companies tend not to. It would raise revenue in the medium term for the Inland Revenue, because there is an enormous overhang of capital gains tax as people realise that 40 per cent. is a punitive level. If we want to free up the capital market, significant reform of capital gains tax—I am talking not about tapering, but about a significant reduction in the rate—is absolutely necessary.

I refer to deregulation in terms of promoting enterprise. The Government have embarked on a first-class initiative in establishing business links, bringing together all the sources of advice that are available to small companies through training and enterprise councils, chambers of commerce, the Department of Trade and Industry, local councils and so on. Recent evidence from a survey by Ernst and Young shows that no fewer than 80 per cent. of companies surveyed use business links in some way

[Mr. Anthony Coombs]

and half the companies take some action to improve the competitiveness of their business as a result of business links. In my constituency, people are embarking on an initiative called business builder—a series of development workshops to help small businesses and to improve the way in which people are educated to run their companies.

Business links can be further developed to encompass the Inland Revenue and the Contributions Agency, so that they become one-stop shops for anyone who wants to set up in business. Those wanting to set up in business can then be guided through the maze of licences and regulations that often have to be overcome before they can do so.

Although that is a success story and although I am aware of the deregulation task force and the unit chaired by Francis Maude, our erstwhile colleague, I still have the impression, as I think do many of our constituents, that regulation—like the sea with King Canute—keeps insidiously rising. I urge the Government to redouble their efforts. It would be helpful, at least in parliamentary terms, if the Deregulation Committee could take a proactive role in deciding which areas should be deregulated rather than merely reacting to what Government Departments say is appropriate. They have been too conservative in the way in which they have used the new, accelerated legislation route whereby secondary legislation can overcome primary legislation.

I should like to see far fewer European Union initiatives on small and medium-sized enterprises. That is yet another form of bureaucracy designed to enable European bureaucrats to justify their own existence. We should turn our back on that.

Far greater importance should be given to the investigation of illegal subsidies on the continent, many of which involve the carpet industry, which employs about 400,100 people in my constituency. Many of those employees are concerned that foreign companies gain an unfair advantage from such illegal subsidies.

I congratulate the Government on the work that they are doing to promote the enterprise economy. The results, which are already becoming evident, will become increasingly evident over the next few months as we move towards the general election. They will ensure that the British people recognise the Government's efforts at the appropriate time.

1.22 pm

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Energy (Mr. Richard Page): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mr. Coombs) for producing this subject for debate. Like him, I believe that an hour and a half would not be long enough to deal with the enormous success story of promoting enterprise in the United Kingdom—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) may try to heckle from below the Gangway, but the success story is coming through, and I shall not be diverted.

My hon. Friend put his finger on what is necessary for this country to drive itself forward to provide employment and a better standard of living for its residents. As I understand it, the message from my hon. Friend for UK Ltd. is, "If you don't earn, you can't spend." The only way in which we shall earn money is by putting people to work in productive manufacturing jobs and gaining the benefits that flow from that.

As my hon. Friend says, it is a success story, and as such it will not attract any publicity, because in this country we tend not to take pride in our successes; we tend to denigrate ourselves and run ourselves down for the occasional failures that come our way.

The Government's aim for this country is clear: we shall make the United Kingdom the enterprise centre of Europe. We are working at that; we are working at the economy to make it the most competitive, dynamic and prosperous in Europe—we are well on the way to achieving that goal. The Government's policies are delivering sustainable growth, low inflation and rising prosperity. Over the past 17 years, the UK economy has turned round, as my hon. Friend said, to transform us from the sick man of Europe to the envy of our European competitors.

Our achievements are immense. The 1980s was the first post-war decade in which output, investment and manufacturing productivity grew faster in the UK than in either France or Germany. We narrowed the productivity gap. Germany was 50 per cent. ahead of us, but it is now only 10 per cent. ahead and, day by day, we are catching up fast. The world is choosing to do business with, and invest in, the UK. We have attracted 40 per cent. of Japanese investment and American inward investment into the European Union. Our stock of inward investment has risen threefold since 1985. The world verdict is: come to Britain because it provides the best environment for jobs and factories to prosper.

It is a pity that the hon. Member for Houghton and Washington (Mr. Boyes) is not present in the Chamber as, since 1995, another 200 jobs have been created at Nissan in his constituency. It is also a shame that the hon. Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown) is not present as he must be absolutely delighted that Lexmark International has come to his constituency and created 500 jobs. The hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) must be delighted that Motorola has come to his constituency and created 500 jobs. I could also speak about the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn)—we must not leave out the Welsh. Some 760 jobs have come to his constituency with the creation of the Newport Wafer company. Another 500 jobs have been created in the constituency of the hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mr. Grocott).

The list goes on and on, and I could spend the next half hour reciting the complete list of inward investments. I could then move on to talk about regional selective support. More than 1,000 companies have been encouraged to come and invest and grow in the United Kingdom. They come here because we have the best environment in which companies can grow and develop. Our inflation performance over the past three and a half years has been the best for almost half a century. We have 16 of Europe's most profitable companies out of the top 25—no wonder the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development described our economic performance as impressive.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest put his finger on an important point when he spoke about competitiveness. It is not a one-off hit; we must pay attention to detail every day. The opposition in other

countries produces goods, and those people will ensure that they work every day to improve their efficiency and quality—we must continue to do the same. We shall achieve that by continuing to create a climate in which business can win, and work with Government to create wealth. We shall achieve that end because we have led the world in policies on privatisation, deregulation and liberalisation and because we have a commitment to open markets.

My hon. Friend mentioned the movements that have taken place in our economy. It is interesting to note—not too many Opposition Members seem to mention it these days—that, before 1979, those "hugely successful" state-owned industries were dipping into the taxpayers' pockets to the tune of £50 million a week. Now, privatised companies produce £55 million a week for the Exchequer. Consumers have benefited because gas and electricity prices have gone down and British Telecom's main prices have gone down by more than 35 per cent. in real terms.

The media and the Labour party will try to ensure that that achievement is perceived as a failure, but it is not—it is a magnificent success. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. When it is asked, the Labour party says that it will not renationalise because it realises that what we have done has given immense support to the British economy. When I was Member of Parliament for Workington, it took 14 man hours for British Steel to produce one tonne of steel; now it takes less than four hours per tonne. We are one of the most efficient economies in the world; we are vying with Korea to be the most profitable steel producer. When British management and the British worker are let free to do their own thing without the dead hand of politicians, they produce results. We are achieving results—we see them coming through every day in our industries.

I am grateful that my hon. Friend introduced this subject for debate. One of the driving forces will be our small business sector, which is why we have done so much to help it. We have driven down corporation tax from the high level of 52 per cent. to the low level of 24 per cent. for small firms. We have raised the VAT level to allow more companies to escape from it, if they so wish.

I must emphasise what my hon. Friend said: we shall not let free the deadly duo—the social chapter and the minimum wage—on to the British business man. My hon. Friend quite rightly pointed out that if we allowed those measures to go through, 900,000 people would be put out of work, and it would be the small business man and small business woman who would be put on the scrap heap.

My hon. Friend made one or two taxation proposals, and there are a variety of reasons why I should not respond to them. One is that the Chancellor of the Exchequer might be slightly upset if I were to give definitive responses at this stage. I must tell my hon. Friend, however, that I have considerable sympathy for a number of his proposals. I congratulate him on initiating the debate today, and I hope that he will keep at it.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Geoffrey Lofthouse): Order. Time is up.

WPC Yvonne Fletcher

1.30 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): My locus in the tragic murder of Woman Police Constable Yvonne Fletcher is simply that, for reasons deployed in seven Adjournment debates and elsewhere, I do not believe the official view on Lockerbie, or that the accusations against Libya provide the whole story. Like Dr. Jim Swire, Pamela Dix, Rev. John Mosey, Martin Cadman and others of the Lockerbie relatives, Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher want the truth.

Very frequently, a Government are justified in dismissing a television programme or a press article as being without foundation—I use polite terminology. But as I watched Fulcrum Production's "Dispatches" programme on Channel 4 on Wednesday, 10 April, I came to the conclusion that casual dismissal simply will not do. I deploy two sets of reasons for that belief.

First, anyone who watches the programme must acknowledge the care and detail with which those responsible for that production have put it together.

Secondly, the people appearing are of a calibre and relevant experience that cannot merely be brushed aside. It is not on to imply that the professional opinion on ballistics of Lieutenant Colonel George Styles is of no value. He had 26 years in the British Army and is one its leading weapons experts.

It is preposterous to imply that the professional opinion of Hugh Thomas on the anatomy of gunshot injuries does not require a serious and detailed response. He is a former chief consultant surgeon to the British Army in Northern Ireland and has dealt with hundreds of firearms injuries in Ulster. Thomas is, quite simply, one of the leading gunshot experts in the world.

The Minister knows that Professor Bernard Knight has been one of the Home Department's most trusted and eminent pathologists for many years. He was entrusted with the investigation at Cromwell street, and much else.

I gave notice to Detective Superintendent Emerton of Scotland Yard, and he to the Home Office, that I would ask the following questions.

First, was Yvonne Fletcher shot from a different direction from that which we have hitherto been given to believe?

Secondly, there is a stark difference between what the pathologist, Dr. Ian West, wrote in the post mortem report and what he said at the inquest. Why is there that discrepancy? In his post mortem report, for example, he suggested that Yvonne Fletcher had been shot from the upper floors of an adjacent building—an angle of wound that he measured as between 60 and 70 deg. At the inquest, however, Dr. West stated:

"Her injuries were entirely consistent with a shot fired from the first floor window of the Embassy, an angle of 15 degrees."

Why was there this extraordinary change of view? Hugh Thomas said that the post mortem, the first view, was correct.

Thirdly, is Hugh Thomas right in saying:

"The one bullet that caused the fatal injury certainly came from the higher building"?

Fourthly, Dr. West expressed the view that WPC Fletcher must have been turning when she was shot. Turning with the natural curve of her back would greatly

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reduce the angle of the bullet wound. Professor Bernard Knight dismisses that analysis. I ask the Government: is Dr. West or Professor Knight right?

Fifthly, is Lieutenant Colonel Styles right in saying that WPC Fletcher's injuries could not have been caused by a Sterling machine-gun fired from the embassy's first floor because of the range and the tumbling nature of the bullet?

Sixthly, why was the video recorded by one of the Libyan demonstrators not presented in evidence at the inquest, even though the police had a copy of it? It was a student video that recorded far more than either of the professional recordings made on 17 April 1984, and it undermined the analysis of the police ballistics experts in terms of the number of bullets fired and the weapons used.

Seventhly, have the police interviewed those members of the intelligence services who witnessed the exchange of signals between the Libyan People's Bureau and Tripoli, which indicated that there would be a shooting incident? Was that information passed on to the police?

Eighthly, can the House of Commons be told what Ministers said to those members of the Security Service who indulged in what we all know was a smear campaign against the then Home Secretary, Sir Leon Brittan?

This matter goes beyond the simply personal concerns of those involved. I appreciate the presence in the Chamber of the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Barnes (Mr. Hanley). This matter concerns our relations with the Arab world and our relations with Libya.

I have had seven Adjournment debates on this subject already, which, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you would not wish me to rehearse. I shall just draw to the House's attention a statement in *The Independent*, on 16 February, by the right hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Needham), a former trade Minister. He wrote:

"Case one involved a large order for Bedford lorries, which were to be used by the Libyan army for civilian purposes—mainly ambulances and fire engines, or so they claimed. The trucks were standard issue and not adapted in any way for military purposes. On this order depended the future of the company. I came to the conclusion that on balance, the company's licence should be supported. I was strongly opposed by the Foreign Office—as much on political grounds, post Lockerbie and post-Scott, as military ones. The Ministry of Defence, as far as I recall, stayed aloof. I lost. The company shut down and its factory now lies empty. Fifteen hundred men and women have had to find new work."

So much for our relations with Libya.

The case refers to a central moral argument. It is not my style to involve such matters in party controversy and therefore it is a pleasure that the hon. Member for Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor), whose record in searching for the truth is impeccable, should have an opportunity to put his point of view.

1.39 pm

Sir Teddy Taylor (Southend, East): In the few minutes available to me I am delighted to associate myself entirely with the specific questions raised by the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) and to pay tribute to the tireless campaign that he has conducted to seek out the truth of the tragic death of Yvonne Fletcher. He has not been engaged in any crusade for any purpose other than to seek to clarify the facts in the interests of Yvonne Fletcher's delightful mother, her family, her friends and our basic democracy.

I am also delighted that the Minister of State, Home Office is on the Front Bench because I can say to him—I hope not to his embarrassment—that, as a difficult Back Bencher, I regard him as one of the straight and honourable Ministers. I hope that this afternoon, if not later, he will disregard any advice that he has from any other Ministry about what is in the national interest and realise that his obligation is to search for the truth.

My interest in the case started some years ago when I had an invitation, which I took up, to resolve what I thought was the issue of that tragic death, which resulted in Colonel Gaddafi being abused for offering £250,000 of what was described as blood money in respect of the murder. When I pointed out to Ministers at the Foreign Office that, far from offering, he was simply responding to a request that I made after long negotiations with officials at the Foreign Office, which was confirmed in writing by one of its senior officials, I was advised that the person concerned had left public service and could not be traced.

As a result of what I describe as active research I was able to go back to the Secretary of State and point out that the official was still employed in the Czechoslovak embassy doing a Czechoslovak language course. I therefore received what I will always treasure to my last day here—a letter from a Foreign Office Minister apologising for the misunderstanding.

I hope that the Minister will accept that the "Dispatches" programme presented evidence that it was simply not possible for the shots to have been fired from the three-storey Libyan embassy and that full details were given of what was happening in six-storey buildings nearby.

As the hon. Member for Linlithgow has said, the issue simply cannot be ignored and the matter is vital to the family and to the people of Libya, who have suffered a great deal from the sanctions that stem from that particular tragedy. I hope that my right hon. Friend will realise, as I believe he does in his heart, that truth is the secret weapon of politics. There is no other way in which we can proceed that is fair to the family and friends affected by that tragic murder without recognising that the crucial thing is to try to establish the facts and tell the people. I fully appreciate that that is not an easy task for a Minister.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow and I have clear views about what happened. At the end of the day, going for the truth, a full inquiry and a clear statement of the facts is a much stronger weapon than any other devious arrangement.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Linlithgow for raising the issue. I hope that my right hon. Friend will once again show the House of Commons that he is one of those who is interested in truth and clarity and nothing else.

1.43 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. David Maclean): The hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) has followed his usual courteous approach by giving me notice that he and my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor) intended to raise certain

allegations about the murder in 1984 of WPC Yvonne Fletcher, which were aired in a recent Channel 4 "Dispatches" programme. I am also grateful to the hon. Member for Linlithgow for his customary courtesy for letting my officials know that he had sent a list of specific questions to the police.

I must say to my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, East that I do not have advice from any other Ministry on what is in the national interest. Any information that I can offer the House is based on police information, and it is straight and honest.

Let me say at once that Yvonne Fletcher's murder was a terrible crime; as the then Home Secretary said in his statement to the House about the incident, it was a barbaric outrage. I, too, want to express my deep sympathy to Yvonne Fletcher's family. I hope that the television programme's reopening of the issues surrounding her death has not caused them more unnecessary, undue distress than they have already suffered.

I entirely share, as do the Government, the police and I am sure all in this House, hon. Members' concern that, if at all possible, the person or persons responsible for WPC Fletcher's murder should finally be brought to justice. But the investigation of that crime, which alone can lead to such a desirable outcome, is a matter for the police, not for the Government, this House, or a television company. It is quite right of course that the hon. Member for Linlithgow has passed to the police his questions about this case. I should say to the hon. Member and to my hon. Friend that if it was not for the fact that I respect the issues raised by hon. Members in the House, and treat their views seriously, I would regard the television programme simply as the preposterous trash that it is. There has been an extensive police investigation into the murder. Sadly, it has not proved—

Mr. Dalyell: "Preposterous trash"? But those are the views of Bernard Knight, who is the most distinguished Home Office pathologist. Is Bernard Knight to be described as preposterous trash?

Mr. Maclean: No, I said that the programme was preposterous trash, as I shall seek demonstrate.

I am not attacking any of the so-called experts, but they did not examine the body at the time, give evidence at the coroner's inquest and have that evidence tested by others. Merely giving opinions on a reconstruction by a television company is not the best way to try to get to the truth of what happened at the time.

It has not proved possible to charge anyone with the murder of WPC Fletcher. The investigation therefore remains open, and the Metropolitan police will, of course, consider any new evidence presented to them. I understand that my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, East has also been in touch with the Metropolitan police about some of the matters raised in the programme. I know that the Metropolitan police are aware of the programme and are reviewing its contents as part of their continuing investigation, including giving specific consideration to question No. 6 tabled by the hon. Member for Linlithgow about why the video shown on the programme was not presented in evidence at the inquest.

As for the assertions made in the programme about the activities of the intelligence agencies, including the allegations that the murderer of WPC Fletcher was privy to information available to intelligence services here and in the USA; that "rogue elements" in those services had a motive to kill WPC Fletcher, an allegation on which the hon. Gentleman based his final question, No. 8, of which he gave me notice; and that members of the intelligence agencies attempted to smear the then Home Secretary, Sir Leon Brittan, the House will be well aware that it is not the Government's usual practice to comment on speculation, however bizarre or preposterous, about the activities of the intelligence services. Nor can I help the hon. Gentleman in respect of his two questions Nos 7 and 8, which relate to intelligence matters.

Having said that, there are several points of which I should like to remind the House. At 10 am on 17 April 1984, a peaceable demonstration was taking place outside the Libyan People's Bureau in St James's square. The police were fully in control and there were no problems of public order. Without any warning, a number of shots were fired from an automatic weapon from a window on the first floor of the bureau. Twelve people were injured with bullet wounds and were taken to hospital, including WPC Yvonne Fletcher, who died shortly afterwards. WPC Fletcher was not the only one to be shot in that frenzied, cowardly attack, but she was the only one to die.

After the shooting took place, the Government immediately asked the Libyan authorities to instruct those inside the bureau to leave the building and to allow it to be searched for weapons and explosives. The Libyan Government refused repeatedly to agree to that request or to co-operate in the criminal investigation into the death of WPC Fletcher. For that reason, we broke off diplomatic relations with Libya, with effect from 22 April.

The programme was wrong to suggest that the incident transformed what had previously been a benign Government attitude to Libya. Our relations with Libya had been particularly bad since 1980. Following Colonel Gaddafi's announcement that all Libyan nationals should return to Libya or be "dealt with", two Libyan dissidents were murdered here and two children of a third were poisoned. The newly accredited secretary-general of the Libyan People's Bureau stated publicly his approval of the killing of Libyan dissidents in the United Kingdom and was required by the then Foreign Secretary to leave the country forthwith. An attempt was made to burn down the British embassy in Tripoli.

On 26 April 1984, the Libyans removed their diplomatic bags from the bureau building. The following day, the 30 people in the bureau left the building. The "Dispatches" programme failed to mention that those people were taken, accompanied by diplomatic observers, to the Civil Service College at Sunningdale, where they were interviewed by the police. They left for Libya that evening.

On 30 April, the police entered the former bureau building. In the course of searching it, they discovered several handguns and a quantity of ammunition. Firearms residue was found on the carpet below the window from which the weapon was believed to have been fired on 17 April and a spent cartridge case of the same calibre as that weapon was found in the same room. Elsewhere in the building, the police found accessories for sub-machine guns of the same calibre.

At that stage, the police view was that there was not sufficient evidence to sustain a prosecution for the murder of WPC Fletcher against any individual, and that they

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would not be able to obtain evidence to sustain a prosecution without the co-operation of those who were in the Libyan People's Bureau. None the less, the police were of the view that it was likely that the murder was committed by one of two people who were in the bureau. Both of them possessed diplomatic immunity and, therefore, could not be prosecuted under English law even if the necessary evidence had been available.

It was claimed in the "Dispatches" programme—solely on the basis of a reading of the post mortem report and the proceedings of the coroner's court—that the angle of entry and the terminal velocity of the bullet that killed WPC Fletcher were such that it could not have been fired from the first or any floor of the Libyan People's Bureau. The programme cast aspersions on the pathologist involved in the case, Dr. Ian West, who I stress was working purely for the coroner and not for the police; and on the coroner, who is of course an independent judicial officer. The analysis of a soundtrack, which was said to reveal a loud shot that we are asked simultaneously to believe was fired from a silenced weapon, was also said to support that assertion.

The programme asks us to believe that WPC Fletcher was murdered by, or with the connivance of, a British or American intelligence officer. If it were not so offensive and obscene, it would be laughable. WPC Fletcher's murder horrified all of us in this country because no one ever imagined that, in a quiet London street in broad daylight, someone would be so mad as to fire a machine gun from an embassy window. The programme asks us to believe that there are assassins in the British or American secret service who are willing to murder a British police officer; that it was some sort of plot that their bosses did not know about, but everyone covered up; and the most preposterous suggestion of all is that that assassin anticipated, or had some knowledge, that some maniac in the Libyan embassy would fire a machine gun into the crowd and, at that point, could simultaneously fire a shot that would kill WPC Fletcher.

If people want to sit in the bowels of some television production company and invent those feverish fantasies, that is up to them. However, I do not know what hurt they have caused the parents of WPC Fletcher and all her other relatives who must be suffering the anguish of not seeing her killers brought to justice. Clearly, the programme makers do not care. However, I do care that the memory of that brave officer should not be sullied by preposterous suggestions that she was murdered by other servants of ours or of a friendly country as part of a treacherous plot. It is a fact that a hail of bullets came out of that embassy window and injured 12 ordinary people. One of those people was a British citizen in uniform, WPC Yvonne Fletcher, who died while on duty protecting the people and the community she served.

Mr. Dalyell: It is all very well for the Minister to use words such as "feverish" and "preposterous", but what about the considered view of Lieutenant Colonel George Styles, who is an expert in ballistics? Do those adjectives apply to his professional views?

Mr. Maclean: My adjectives apply to a programme that second-guessed the evidence and conducted reconstructions. It asked people to comment on evidence that was prepared by a professional pathologist and presented to an independent coroner during a full inquest. It was a re-reading of history and no doubt a dozen experts could make of the evidence what they will.

The problem with experts looking at evidence 12 years after the event is that none of their opinions has been tested in court before a jury. Dr. West's opinions, his analysis of the body and his painstaking reconstruction of the bullet's angle of entry into the body and through the tunic were presented at the inquest. His evidence was tested and the jury believed the evidence that was presented to it. It is preposterous that a programme should do a reconstruction and invite any number of experts—who did not examine the body and who were not present at the time of the incident—to offer opinions and comments when they do not have the full facts.

Several of the questions that the hon. Gentleman asked me arise from the assertions in the programme: was Yvonne Fletcher shot from a direction different from that which we have hitherto understood? Is Professor Thomas, who was interviewed on the programme, correct in his belief that the bullet must have been fired from the top of a high building? Is Dr. West right that WPC Fletcher must have been turning when she was shot, or is Professor Knight, who was also interviewed on the programme, right to dismiss that analysis? Is Lieutenant Colonel Styles right that WPC Fletcher's injuries could not have been caused by a Sterling machine gun fired from the embassy's first floor?

My response to all those questions is as follows. I understand that Dr. Ian West—the pathologist who worked on the case—in co-operation with eminent scientists from the Metropolitan police forensic science laboratory, carried out detailed experimental work following the murder on the question of the angle of entry of the fatal bullet, including a reconstruction using the tunic that WPC Fletcher had been wearing. The question was explored at the coroner's inquest before a jury, and the evidence given convinced that jury that WPC Fletcher was unlawfully killed by a bullet coming from one of two windows on the west side at the front of the first floor of the bureau.

In response to the hon. Gentleman's second question, it is simply not the case that Dr. West changed his mind between writing his post mortem report and giving evidence at the inquest. The programme's claim that he did is based on a misreading of the papers and an insufficient understanding of a number of the scientific issues involved—including the fact that the angle from the horizontal of the entry of a bullet into a body lying flat is different from the angle if the body were erect and different again, as was demonstrated experimentally, if the body were turning and the shoulders dropping. I understand that it also remains the view of the police, on the basis of substantial physical evidence collected immediately after the shooting, that the shots that killed Yvonne Fletcher were fired from within the Libyan People's Bureau.

If the hon. Member for Linlithgow and my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, East believe that the inquest was in some way flawed or unsatisfactory, there is provision for the matter to be reviewed by the courts. Under section 13 of the Coroners Act 1988, an application may be made to the High Court, with the consent of the Attorney-General, for a fresh inquest to be ordered. All coroner's decisions are subject to judicial review.

However, I stress that it is not open to politicians, such as the Home Secretary or any other Minister, to comment on the decisions taken by coroners in individual cases.

As I have said, I share the concern expressed by the hon. member for Linlithgow and my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, East that the full truth of the matter should be established and that the person or persons responsible for WPC Yvonne Fletcher's murder should finally be brought to justice. I believe that the best way of making progress towards that end is for the Libyan nationals who were in the bureau at the time of the shooting to co-operate fully at last with the investigation into the murder. The Libyan Government, whose representatives were not among those who spoke to the programme, should accept responsibility for the actions of their officials.

It being Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Sitting suspended, pursuant to Standing Order No. 10 (Wednesday sittings), till half-past Two o'clock.

PRIVATE BUSINESS

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON BILL

Bill read the Third time, and passed.

HENRY JOHNSON, SONS AND CO., LIMITED BILL

Considered; to be read the Third time.

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Lebanon

1. **Mr. Mudie:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on events in south Lebanon. [27192]

2. **Mr. Gerrard:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the current situation in Lebanon. [27193]

6. **Mr. Booth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the current relationship between Israel and Lebanon. [27197]

11. **Mr. Watson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the Israeli Government relating to recent bombing raids on Lebanon. [27202]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Malcolm Rifkind): While we welcome the ceasefire reached in Lebanon, the region will attain peace only as a result of a comprehensive settlement. We strongly support the resumption of talks in the framework of the middle east peace process.

Mr. Mudie: The Foreign Secretary's colleague, the Secretary of State for Defence, is on record as suggesting that Israeli actions were not disproportionate. In view of the sad events at Qana, what is the Foreign Secretary's view?

Mr. Rifkind: The sad events at Qana happened some time after the remarks made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence. The important point to emphasise is that the United Kingdom, including my colleague the Secretary of State, has always made it clear that, given the Hezbollah attacks on Israel, it was not unexpected that there should be a response by the Israelis. It was crucial that any response should be measured and proportionate. The attack on Qana was, of course, a tragedy, and it has been widely deplored. When I spoke to the Israeli Foreign Minister on the night that it happened, he described it as a tragedy that was bitterly regretted. One takes that into account. However, one must also take into account the recent United Nations report, which makes disturbing reading.

Mr. Booth: Does the Foreign Secretary agree that he would express incredulity at the idea that the Israelis should attack any innocent civilians, bearing in mind their history and the fact that they have no known territorial ambitions towards Lebanon? Will he put pressure on Syria, as part of the international community, to ensure that the vassal state of Lebanon is free to make peace with Israel?

Mr. Rifkind: It is intolerable for Israelis living in northern Israel to be subject to Katyusha attacks and it is an undisputed fact that the recent crisis began with Katyusha rockets being used against Israeli civilians. The only proper way of achieving peace is through a mutual cessation of violence as a means of resolving the problems. Against that background, we warmly welcomed the agreement that has resulted in an end to that crisis. I have no illusions about the fact that, until the peace process goes forward on a comprehensive basis, any progress on those localised but serious issues will be only a partial solution to the problem.

Mr. Gerrard: Does the Foreign Secretary agree that the United Nations reports suggest that the events at Qana were avoidable and that the comments by his colleague put the Government in the position of appearing to condone the bombing of Lebanese villages and the gross disregard for the human rights of Lebanese civilians, who were driven from their homes and returned to find those homes destroyed? As for the territorial ambitions of Israel, is not the only way that we shall get a lasting peace in the area when Israel eventually agrees to abide by international law and to withdraw from the occupied part of south Lebanon, as UN resolution 425 requires?

Mr. Rifkind: There were two disturbing aspects of the United Nations report, although we have not yet had the chance to study it in great detail. The first was the conclusion that it reached, that the Israelis might have deliberately intended to target the UN camp. The second was the criticism of UN officials for having allowed Hezbollah individuals to enter the camp in the first place. Both matters should be properly addressed and properly dealt with.

Mr. Cyril D. Townsend: Will my right hon. and learned Friend take this opportunity to praise the Secretary-General for compiling a report on the incident at Qana so quickly after the event, and a report that criticises officers of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon in some regards? Is it not deplorable that some countries, notably the United States and Israel, should seek to have that report kept under covers?

Mr. Rifkind: It is not realistic to believe that such a report can, or should, be kept as an internal, confidential matter. It is a matter of supreme public interest and it is right and proper that the serious conclusions that have been reached should be addressed. We have noted the clear statement by the Israelis that they do not accept the criticisms that have been made. We understand the sensitivities involved, but it is important that—on a matter which resulted in so many tragic deaths and which gave rise to so much concern—the cause of, and responsibility for, the incidents is properly investigated.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: Does the Foreign Secretary accept that whether the bombardment was deliberate, careless or accidental is of no moment for the victims, having regard to the consequences? Can he tell us precisely what representations the Government made to Israel after the bombardment? In particular, did the Foreign Secretary convey to the Israeli Government the fact that the events have done them grave diplomatic and political damage?

Mr. Rifkind: Shortly after the bombing was reported—indeed, later that day, as I told the House a few moments

ago—I spoke directly to the Israeli Foreign Minister on the telephone. He expressed the Government's deep sense that what had happened was a tragedy and he maintained then, as they have maintained ever since, that it was not part of the deliberate policy of the Israeli Government, and there was no deliberate decision, to attack the camp. That has been their position, and they have held it consistently.

Mr. Janner: I share the grief at the awful tragedies of war. Will the Secretary of State join—I hope—the whole House in congratulating Warren Christopher on achieving and brokering a ceasefire, in the hope that that will lead to a real peace in which both sides will be able to look after their people and ensure that their civilians are not attacked?

Mr. Rifkind: Yes, of course, I warmly congratulate the efforts of Secretary of State Christopher and all the others who have been involved in the search for peace. The hon. and learned Gentleman is correct to refer to a ceasefire. It is not a peace, and we shall not have made real progress until the substantive Israeli-Syrian discussions get going again. We hope that they will not only lead to a peace between Israel and Syria, but will unlock the process that will produce a peace between Israel and Lebanon as part of the wider middle eastern peace process.

Mr. Rathbone: While pursuing that end, which the whole House will endorse, will my right hon. and learned Friend start at last to bring British Government pressure on Israel to withdraw from the illegal occupation of southern Lebanon, according to United Nations resolution 425, which was reiterated by the more recent United Nations resolution of last April?

Mr. Rifkind: I agree with my hon. Friend that the Israeli occupation of south Lebanon is illegal. We have made it clear, in an unambiguous way, to the Israeli Government that we do not accept their entitlement to be in south Lebanon and that we urge them to comply in recognising the international boundaries.

Mr. Fatchett: I am sure that everyone will welcome the ceasefire and the prospects for resuming peace negotiations, but does the Secretary of State understand that there is concern on both sides of the House that Britain, with its unique history and links in the middle east, appeared to have no effective role in brokering the ceasefire? Is it not about time that Britain assumed a much more proactive role, using its history, links and experience to build a bridge between the parties in the middle east so that we assume some responsibilities, or are we prepared to leave that to the Americans and the French and become a spectator, rather than a participator seeking a comprehensive and just peace in the middle east?

Mr. Rifkind: The hon. Gentleman's premise is incorrect. During the course of the crisis, we were in regular contact with Syrian, Israeli, Lebanese and other political leaders. I took a conscious decision not to join a substantial number of other Foreign Ministers who were going to Syria or to the region. I do not believe that the success of one's influence is measured by membership of a large group of ministers. The crucial requirement was for the international community to co-ordinate its position.

The interests of Britain, France and the United States were not different. We had a common interest in peace. The prospects for peace would have been even better enhanced if there had been early co-ordination and a common position rather than the slightly more complex arrangements that a number of countries chose to introduce.

Hezbollah (Syrian and Iranian Support)

3. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment his Department has made of the support given by the Governments of Syria and Iran for Hezbollah; and if he will make a statement. [27194]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Jeremy Hanley): Despite the fact that Hezbollah denies control by Iran or Syria, we believe that Iran provides military and financial assistance to Hezbollah, and that Syria facilitates supplies and gives political support.

Mr. Fabricant: I thank my right hon. Friend for his frank and honest answer. Are not the tragic events that have taken place in south Lebanon the culmination of over a year's raining down of Katyusha rockets by Hezbollah on Kiryat Shimonem and other settlements in northern Israel? Will my right hon. Friend and my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State exert more pressure on Syria and Iran to stop the provision of money, arms and support for Hezbollah in its terrorist activities against Israel?

Mr. Hanley: My hon. Friend is right about the influences on Hezbollah. Syria has sufficient troops—purportedly some 35,000 to 40,000 in Lebanon—to hamper Hezbollah activities in the areas where its forces are deployed. There is little doubt that Syrian support has enabled Hezbollah to maintain its armed resistance against Israel. Furthermore, as recently as 19 April, Iran's spiritual leader reportedly called on Hezbollah to step up its operations against Israel. We call on all those with the ability to influence Hezbollah to restrain it from the use of violence. As my right hon. and learned Friend has said, we have given full support to international efforts to exert pressure on Iran and Syria to control Hezbollah and to lead us towards a resumption of the peace process. Our ambassador in Beirut, Maeve Fort, has lobbied the Lebanese to ensure that they do what they can to reduce Hezbollah's military activity. Now, we must give the ceasefire a chance.

Mr. Faulds: Would it not be more advisable if the Government, and the House of Commons come to that, were a little less hypocritical and a little more honest about this situation? Is it not a fact that Israel is in occupation of southern Lebanon, against the United Nations resolution? Is it not a fact that any young men in a country under occupation, whether it is Scotland in my historic days, and the right hon. and learned Gentleman's historic days—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps the Foreign Secretary does not remember Scottish history—I do. Is it not a fact that, in such historic circumstances—this applies to southern Lebanon—any young men with any principle would form a band to oppose the occupying

armies? Is that not exactly what Hezbollah is doing? Instead of criticising Syria and Iran, we should be adopting, perhaps, their more sensitive and responsible attitude to Hezbollah's operations against an occupying army.

Mr. Hanley: My right hon. and learned Friend—*[Interruption.]* I regret this element of levity in our discussion of a desperately serious subject. Let me tell the hon. Gentleman that my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary has clearly stated the United Kingdom's view—which is shared by the international community—on securing United Nations Security Council resolution 425, which states that Israel's occupation is illegal. It is fairly plain that Hezbollah will continue its opposition until such time as Israel withdraws, but I believe that the best chance of that will be provided by a resumption of the peace process. We welcome the fact that the ceasefire agreement calls for a resumption of talks between Syria and Israel, and between Israel and Lebanon. That is the best way in which to reach a point at which peace will reign in southern Lebanon.

Mr. Batiste: Can my right hon. Friend confirm that the Israeli Government have made it clear that they have no wish to remain in southern Lebanon once the security of Israel's northern villages can be confirmed? Does that not mean that it is Syria that holds the key to peace, and that, if it were prepared to control Hezbollah, the peace process—both in Lebanon and in relation to the Golan heights—could continue? That is the only real way in which lasting peace can be brought to all the people in the area.

Mr. Hanley: I believe that Israel will withdraw if it feels secure enough to do so. Under UN Security Council resolution 425, that is its duty. It is, perhaps, easy to understand that a nation should be allowed to defend itself and its own citizens; therefore there must be restraint on both sides, and I hope that, over a period, restraint will lead to what the international community demands.

Middle East Peace Process

4. **Mrs. Roche:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has received concerning the middle east peace process. [27195]

7. **Mr. Canavan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the situation in the middle east. [27198]

Mr. Rifkind: We welcome the commencement of final-status talks between Israel and the Palestinians at Taba on 5 May. We look forward to the resumption of talks between Syria and Israel, and a lasting and comprehensive peace in the middle east.

Mrs. Roche: Does the Foreign Secretary agree that, as some of his hon. Friends have pointed out, one of the keys to progress in peace talks in the middle east is a change in Syria's attitude? Syria refused to attend the talks on preventing a spread of terrorism in the middle east. When the Foreign Secretary was asked by his own side what positive contribution the British Government could make, he and his colleagues could give no assurances or undertakings. Coupled with the British Government's failure to play a significant part in brokering the ceasefire, does that not show that the Government are not really interested in advancing the peace process in any meaningful way?

Mr. Rifkind: I am afraid that that was a very silly question. The hon. Lady seems to measure a country's degree of involvement by the travels of its Foreign Minister, but I do not necessarily see a direct link. There are many occasions on which a Minister visiting a particular location can make an important contribution, and other occasions on which such a visit can make a difficult situation even more complex.

The fact is that the international community had a single interest in a ceasefire and an end to the conflict in Lebanon. It was always evident that the United States would carry the greatest weight and influence in a matter of this kind. Our interests, and those of other European countries, were the same as those of the United States: we were interested in an early ceasefire and an end to the conflict. The best contribution that we could all make was a co-ordinated international effort, and that is what eventually produced the ceasefire that we have all welcomed.

Mr. Canavan: For how long will Israel be allowed to treat international law and the United Nations with contempt by flouting resolution 425 and mounting vicious attacks such as the one on the UN peacekeeping base at Qana, which killed 102 innocent civilians? Will the Foreign Secretary tell us clearly whether he did, in fact, convey to the Israeli Government a strong message condemning such an atrocity? Will he also consult our UN partners about what action can be taken to make Israel comply with resolution 425?

Mr. Rifkind: I can say quite plainly that I made it clear directly to the Israeli Foreign Minister that we deeply deplored the shelling of the UN base and the loss of life. As the hon. Gentleman is aware, the Israelis maintained, and continue to maintain, that the shelling was by accident and not by design. The extent to which one condemns such incidents depends on whether one concludes that it was deliberate or by accident. That is why I have said that the UN report, which is disturbing, needs to be properly addressed and examined.

Sir Mark Lennox-Boyd: Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the continuing restrictions on the movement of Palestinians out of Gaza and the west bank to their work is causing them most dire economic hardship? As any peace process must involve winning the hearts and minds of people who are not violent and want to go about their business, everyone should make the strongest representations to the Israeli Government to allow the free movement of people.

Mr. Rifkind: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. When the Israeli deputy Foreign Minister was in London recently, we made representations to him exactly to that effect. We have been pleased that there has been some progress in reopening the borders of Gaza and the west bank. We believe that maximum progress of that kind would be valuable because great economic hardship is

being caused to the Palestinians by the closing of the borders. It is therefore important that that should be taken into account when the Israelis consider their security interests.

Mr. Jacques Arnold: Was not the disaster in Qana a tragedy waiting to happen, given Hezbollah's practice of siting for firing its Katyusha rockets next to mosques, hospitals and other civil installations?

Mr. Rifkind: The fact that such incidents occur close to UN bases is certainly a disturbing feature. That is part of the wider picture and emphasises the need for an urgent and comprehensive way in which to resolve the region's complex problems.

Mr. Ernie Ross: Have there not been recent hopeful moves in the middle east such as, in the recent Palestine National Council meeting, the dropping of articles in the Palestinian charter that call for the destruction of Israel and the decision of the Israeli Labour Government to remove opposition to a Palestinian state? Does the Secretary of State welcome the statement by Prime Minister Peres that the Israelis will consider paying compensation for the damage caused in Lebanon? What action will the right hon. and learned Gentleman take to ensure that the Israelis are encouraged along that line of compensation? I agree with him that the only way forward is a comprehensive peace plan based on international law in Security Council resolutions 242, 338 and 425.

Mr. Rifkind: The hon. Gentleman has raised some important points. The decisions of the PLO to amend its covenant and of the Israeli Government to drop from their party platform opposition to a Palestinian state are truly historic. Even in the midst of the rather depressing and disturbing events of the past few weeks, two decisions were announced by Palestinians and Israelis that mark a dramatic change from the entrenched positions that both have held for the past 40 years. It opens up a prospect of real and fundamental peace, and emphasises the ability of Palestinians and Israelis to work together to remove some of the deep-seated prejudices that have so dogged progress in that area for so long.

Mr. John Marshall: Will my right hon. and learned Friend confirm that Israeli Arabs are the only Arabs entitled to vote in a democratic election, as they will later this month? Does he accept that, when their citizens are under attack, as citizens were from Katyusha rockets and kamikaze guerrillas in northern Israel, any democratic Government has to react, as the Israeli Government did, and that that action was aggravated by Syria and Iran's failure to attend the recent summit to combat terrorism?

Mr. Rifkind: A depressing feature of the middle east for so long has been the cycle of violence, with one violent incident being used to justify others. I do not believe that one is required to choose between them. In each case, a problem arises out of the overall failure to achieve a peace process in the region. That emphasises the need to turn away from that historical confrontation. As has been said, it is encouraging that some fundamental progress has been made and continues to be made towards a comprehensive peace in the region as a whole.

Sir David Steel: Will the Foreign Secretary confirm that the cornerstone of the Government's policy in the middle east remains the resolutions of the UN Security Council, especially in view of the exposed position of the UN peacekeeping force in the Lebanon? While I welcome the superb efforts of Secretary of State Christopher, will the Foreign Secretary also make it clear that, in the wider politics of the middle east, it is the authority of the UN that counts rather than the authority of the US?

Mr. Rifkind: Of course the legitimate authority has to be that of the United Nations. The UN itself has been grateful to the United States and to all others who have contributed towards the achievement of a peace settlement in the region.

Kashmir

5. **Mr. Lidington:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to visit Pakistan to discuss the future of Kashmir. [27196]

Mr. Hanley: I visited Pakistan in March, and my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary hopes to visit Pakistan in due course to discuss our strongly developing commercial and other links, and a range of other issues including Kashmir.

Mr. Lidington: Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is unlikely to be any political agreement on Kashmir while the people of that area still live in fear of torture and terrorism? Will he urge the Governments of Pakistan and of India, as a first step, at least to agree to the independent investigation of allegations of human rights abuses?

Mr. Hanley: I shall repeat what bears repeating, which is the Government's policy on Kashmir. We think that the best way forward on Kashmir should involve simultaneous progress on dialogue between India and Pakistan, as provided for under the 1972 Simla agreement; improvement in human rights in Kashmir; genuine political progress there; and a clear cessation of external support for violence in Kashmir. My hon. Friend is right that an improvement in human rights in Kashmir is essential to a solution and to peace in that troubled part of the world. We remain concerned about human rights in Kashmir. We have regularly raised our concerns with the Indian Government and welcome the policy of greater openness by that Government, in particular their decision to allow the International Committee of the Red Cross to operate in Kashmir.

Mr. Pike: Will the Minister recognise that, while we do not yet know the outcome of the Indian election, it presents an opportunity to get a new opening and that, together with Pakistan and India, we have to see movement to end the situation in Kashmir? Will the Government use that opportunity to make representations to the new Indian Government, as soon as that has been formed?

Mr. Hanley: The hon. Gentleman is right. We do not know exactly what the Government of India will be. We have been disappointed in the past when talks between India and Pakistan—for instance those in Islamabad in January 1994—were not continued. We recognise that finding a solution will not be easy, but we shall continue

to urge both countries to try to resolve their differences through peaceful negotiation. A new Government in India, of whatever complexion, could be an opportunity for dialogue between India and Pakistan and, of course, we in the United Kingdom remain available to help should both sides want that.

Mr. Waller: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the vast expenditure of billions of pounds by India and Pakistan on armaments and military forces—there are 600,000 members of the security forces in Jammu and Kashmir—could be much better spent on resolving the problems of the sub-continent in terms of better health and social services and better education? When the elections in India are over, will my right hon. Friend exert every possible pressure on India and Pakistan to sit down and enter into meaningful discussions with the objective, among other things, that the people of Kashmir have some say in their own future?

Mr. Hanley: I agree utterly with my hon. Friend. I have personally raised with Indian and Pakistani Ministers their expenditure on the arms race and the missile race and on nuclear issues. That is wasteful and, of course, diverts from the real problems of both countries involving the poor. There would be much more money available for those who are in dire need if there were peace between these two countries and continuing dialogue.

Burundi

8. **Ms Church:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with his UN partners regarding the current situation in Burundi. [27199]

Mr. Hanley: We are in close contact with our partners in the Security Council and in the European Union and with relevant United Nations organisations about the position in Burundi—indeed, the Secretary-General's report will be discussed tomorrow. On 2 May, my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary met former President Nyerere, who is leading international efforts to promote political dialogue in Burundi.

Ms Church: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he assure the House that he is aware that the situation in Burundi is worsening daily, that hundreds of people are being killed every month in genocidal conflict and that the Secretary-General is warning the UN Security Council that it could degenerate into genocidal war? What specific steps are the British Government urging should be taken not only to protect human life in Burundi, but to ensure that humanitarian aid gets through to people who need it?

Mr. Hanley: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question and for her concern. She is right; the situation in Burundi is deteriorating. Indeed, since early April, the security situation in Burundi has deteriorated significantly and a substantial number of small-scale massacres and political assassinations, perpetrated by extremist Hutu guerrillas, Tutsi militias and the heavy-handed Burundi armed forces, have taken place.

Most humanitarian agencies have withdrawn from the country—some having been attacked following a hostile media campaign—but we are trying hard to ensure that humanitarian aid is available. Since January 1996, we have given £1.3 million bilaterally, and our share of multilateral aid through the European Union has been £750,000. As I have said, we are looking forward to the discussion in the Security Council on the Secretary-General's report on Burundi.

Mr. Tony Lloyd: May I draw the House's attention to the parallels between the present position in Burundi and that in Rwanda before the genocide there? In particular, may I draw the Minister's attention to the international report on that genocide, which made it clear that the lack of decisive political action by the UN, the United States of America, Britain, France and other Security Council members—not the lack of humanitarian aid, welcome though that was—led to the problems in Rwanda? May we have an absolute guarantee that, welcome though Britain's efforts are in ensuring that aid flows in, political action will be taken to ensure that we do not see in Burundi genocide such as that other part of Africa recently witnessed?

Mr. Hanley: The hon. Gentleman is right; we do not want Burundi to follow the path of Rwanda, but we have hope in that, as I have mentioned, former President Nyerere visited London recently, had meetings with my right hon. and noble Friend the Minister for Overseas Development and attended a working lunch hosted by my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary. The main focus of discussion was the former President's efforts to promote political dialogue among Burundi's political parties. We support those discussions and are putting a considerable amount of money towards the cost of arranging the talks. Initial meetings have taken place, and I hope that former President Nyerere's initiative will bear fruit. As I said in answer to the hon. Member for Dagenham (Ms Church), we are looking forward to tomorrow's discussion on the subject in the Security Council.

EU Enlargement

9. **Ms Roseanna Cunningham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with his European counterparts on measures to facilitate the enlargement of the EU; and if he will make a statement. [27200]

10. **Mr. Nigel Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with his EU counterparts on the enlargements of the EU. [27201]

Mr. Rifkind: I frequently discuss enlargement of the European Union with my counterparts. We are working hard to create the conditions in which enlargement can take place successfully.

Ms Cunningham: Given the Government's view that further enlargement may mean that it would be inappropriate for each member state to have its own Commissioner, and the understandable rejection of that view in large parts of the European Union, does the Secretary of State consider that an equitable solution

would be for each of the larger states to give up one Commissioner, thereby making the position much simpler?

Mr. Rifkind: I think that the hon. Lady's understanding of the views of other states needs some clarification. At the moment, there are potentially 27 members of the European Union which, under current rules, would mean our having more than 30 Commissioners, regardless of whether there was work for them to do or departments for them to run. That is clearly an absurd proposition. The problem would not be resolved simply by larger states agreeing to have only one Commissioner; there would still be far too many for the job required. A more radical view is therefore clearly necessary.

Mr. Griffiths: Does the Government's view on European Union enlargement correspond more closely with the views of the hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South–West (Mr. Budgen) or with those of the hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. Dykes)?

Mr. Rifkind: The Government's views on the European Union correspond with the views of the British public.

Mr. Garnier: Does my right hon. and learned Friend accept the fact that the introduction of a common foreign and security policy under the aegis of the European Union would be a hindrance rather than an assistance to enlargement?

Mr. Rifkind: A common foreign and security policy that concentrated on areas in which there is a genuine identity of interests between the member states would be useful, and we would welcome it, because it would give added weight to our overseas representations. However, we would strongly oppose any attempt to achieve a common foreign policy by majority voting, which would seek to impose on states with different national interests policies that they could not possibly accommodate.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: Is not the enlargement of the European Community/Union the most important objective of the Union, and can that aim be helped in any way by the pathetic and expensive propaganda of a Europe day, which I understand is to take place tomorrow? Was not my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland absolutely right to fly the Union Jack and not to peddle the pathetic multi-yellow-starred flag?

Mr. Rifkind: It has been the policy throughout the United Kingdom not to fly the European Union flag from public buildings, so the policy enunciated by my right hon. Friend was consistent with that pursued for many years—under Governments of both parties, I believe.

Mr. Gapes: Will the Foreign Secretary confirm that, in the negotiations in the intergovernmental conference, it is still the Government's policy to oppose any extension of any kind into any area of qualified majority voting? If so, are the Government happy to allow the smallest countries, such as Luxembourg and potentially Malta and Cyprus, an indefinite veto on any developments?

Mr. Rifkind: In saying that, the hon. Gentleman seems ignorant of the fact that qualified majority voting already applies in large areas. It applies, for example, to virtually all matters involving the common agricultural policy and the single European market, as well as in a wide range of other areas. For that precise reason, I can confirm that we shall oppose any further extension of qualified majority voting.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Will my right hon. and learned Friend confirm that most of the countries that want to join the European Community have social conditions that are not up to the standard of the social chapter, so that if the social chapter became a universal requirement of membership it would stop countries joining, which would be bad for them and bad for the rest of the Union?

Mr. Rifkind: My hon. Friend has made a valuable and important point. It is one of the characteristics of the European Union that flexibility is becoming much more acceptable. It used to be heretical to contemplate the idea of individual countries not participating in areas of common action or policy, but there are now many areas in which not only the United Kingdom but Denmark and other countries do not participate in certain actions that the majority has chosen to initiate. That is an important characteristic, which we should take into account.

Mr. Robin Cook: Will the Foreign Secretary admit that the Government will not carry much clout in negotiations on enlargement when so many of their Back Benchers want to shrink the European Union by detaching us from it? As he believes that the Government's views are in such happy unity with those of the country, can he tell us whether the Government agree with the views of the Deputy Prime Minister, who believes that retaliation against Europe would be macho, or with those of the chairman of the 1922 Committee, who wants retaliation to bludgeon Europe? Is not the real tragedy for the country that the Government's relations with Europe now take second place to in-fighting about who will take over the Conservative leadership once the country has thrown them out?

Mr. Rifkind: As the hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) has spent most of his political career advocating that this country should be detached from the European Union, he carries less than total conviction when, now, he seeks to present himself as an apostle of the European ideal.

Mr. Devlin: Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that a large community of nations is queuing up to join the EU? Does he agree that those countries look forward to the pleasure of flying a blue flag with gold stars on Europe day? Will he take the opportunity tomorrow, on Europe day, to state the benefits that this country receives every day from the EU, not least the significant investment that has been made in the north of England and in Scotland?

Mr. Rifkind: My hon. Friend is right to refer to the fact that there has been a consistent desire to join the European Union, and not just on the part of countries at the poorer end of the prosperity spectrum. Countries such as Austria, Sweden and Finland—despite their relative prosperity—believe that membership of the EU is crucial to their interests, because it will enable them to participate

in decisions on issues that will affect them. That is also of particular importance for the United Kingdom, and it is why I believe that this country's interests are extremely well served by our ability to participate in the continental and global decisions that the EU takes.

Kashmir

12. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he has taken at the United Nations to secure a resolution of the conflict in Kashmir. [27204]

Mr. Hanley: Our policy on Kashmir is well known—indeed, I set it out again earlier this afternoon. We are ready to help find a solution if both sides ask us.

Mr. Prentice: Will the Minister comment on the statement made on 5 May by the Prime Minister of India, Mr. Narasimha Rao, that Kashmir would remain a permanent and integral part of India? Does he agree that the elections currently taking place in Jammu and Kashmir will not confer any legitimacy, and that the only thing that will is a plebiscite on self-determination? Is there not a case for a fresh initiative at the United Nations, and a fresh resolution, as the previous ones date from 1947, 1948 and 1960?

Mr. Hanley: I repeat that we believe that the best way forward must involve a simultaneous progress in dialogue between India and Pakistan, as provided for under the 1972 Simla agreement. In the attempts to provide a genuine political process and an improvement in human rights in Kashmir, we hope that as many people as possible in Kashmir will be consulted. A clear cessation of external support for violence in Kashmir is also vital. The Government's position with regard to Kashmir is both sustainable and honest. There can be no solution in Kashmir without India and Pakistan talking to each other, and we urge them to do so.

Mr. Jessel: The first results from the Indian elections come through tonight, including those from Jammu where, I am told, the turnout was more than 50 per cent. The elections in Kashmir valley are to follow later this month. Would it not be disgraceful if electors there were scared off by militants and terrorists armed and trained in Pakistan? Will the UN be asked to look into that?

Mr. Hanley: The parliamentary elections in Kashmir are taking place on 7, 23 and 30 May. We hope that militant groups will not resort to violence to disrupt the elections and will allow those who wish to participate to do so. There is some time to go before the results of the elections are known. As I said earlier, we have long advocated the need for a genuine political process in Kashmir. I believe that free and fair elections could be a catalyst for that process.

Mr. Madden: When will the Government acknowledge the sad lesson of history that, on at least seven occasions, successive Governments of Pakistan and India have failed miserably to reach any political agreement on Kashmir? When will the Government encourage the United Nations to intervene? When will a long-lasting and real agreement on Kashmir, based on the resolutions of the United Nations, be an immediate prospect? Will the Minister guarantee that the new Government of India, after taking office, will not be allowed an undue period before such progress is made?

Mr. Hanley: The hon. Gentleman referred to the previous United Nations resolutions. The resolutions of 1948 and 1949—which India and Pakistan agreed to and which the United Kingdom supported—provided the basis of a possible solution of the Kashmir dispute. Regrettably, neither side has fully implemented the resolutions and, to some extent, they have been overtaken by events. The 1972 Simla agreement between India and Pakistan represents the most recent formal agreement of both sides on the handling of their dispute over Kashmir. The agreement envisaged a final solution of the dispute

"through bilateral negotiations or by any other peaceful means mutually agreed between them."

That is what I would urge on any new Government in India, whether it be Mr. Rao's Government or a new Government. I would urge dialogue with Pakistan. That is the only way to make progress.

European Commission

13. **Mr. David Evans:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list those decisions and powers of the European Commission which are not subject to scrutiny by the European Parliament. [27205]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. David Davis): The European Parliament does not formally scrutinise the Commission's role in enacting implementing measures under powers delegated by the Council, in pursuing infraction proceedings, in enforcing competition policy or in negotiating international agreements. In many areas, there are informal arrangements for scrutiny by the European Parliament.

Mr. Evans: Does not this confirm that unelected Commissioners tell us day in, day out, what we can or cannot do? Is it not time that we protected the farmers and fishermen of the United Kingdom from these unelected bureaucrats? We know that the lot opposite, under the banner of the skull and crossbones, would give our sovereignty away. Is it not time that the Government, on behalf of the British people, told Brussels to get stuffed?

Mr. Davis: If I were braver, I would ask my hon. Friend to wish Janice a happy Europe day tomorrow. My hon. Friend referred to "the lot opposite". I do not think that the skull and crossbones is the right flag for the Labour party—I think that the white flag would be more appropriate.

Mr. Watson: Is the Minister aware that, today, in the European Commission and the European Parliament, a visit is taking place by 25 civil servants from the Scottish Office? Notwithstanding what the Foreign Secretary said earlier about Europe day and what the Scottish Secretary said about not flying the European Union flag, does not this show the hypocrisy in the Government over Europe, the confusion and the facing two ways at once? Is it not one of the reasons why the people of this country are

desperate to get rid of the Conservatives and to have in power a party that is positive about Europe for positive reasons?

Mr. Davis: It is quite extraordinary for the hon. Gentleman to suggest that my party faces two ways at once. As my late mother used to say, that is the kettle calling the pot black. I would be happy to call the Labour party's policy two-faced. Looking at the hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook), if he had two faces he would not use the one that he has.

Mr. Budgen: Does my hon. Friend agree that the powers of the European Parliament illustrate that we have a half-formed federal structure in Europe? Does he agree that either we will have the disadvantages of there being no proper control over the Commission or, if we give the European Parliament extra powers, we will give it powers over this House and other democratic assemblies in Europe, which will take us further along the road towards a federal structure—which is being comprehensively rejected by the people of this country?

Mr. Davis: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that the federal structure is comprehensively rejected by the people of this country. As for the control of the Commission, my hon. Friend is right in one respect: a great deal of legislation emanates from the Commission and it is for us, as part of the intergovernmental conference process, to try to ensure that the Council, not the European Parliament, gets a tighter control on it.

Mr. Sheerman: Do not answers such as those that we have just heard from the Minister drag down the reputation of the House? Hon. Members on both sides of the House deserve better than that.

There is a serious question about Europe. Executives need to be restrained by legislatures. Even those with pro-European views regard that as a problem that has to be sorted out. I am one who would fly the European flag tomorrow, but there are serious questions about empowering the European Parliament and domestic Parliaments in order to control both the Council of Ministers and the European Commission.

Mr. Davis: It is correct that the Executive should control—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"]—that there should be democratic control of the Executive. What the hon. Gentleman misses, however, is that the British people see as their proper democratic representation this House of Commons, first and last.

Gibraltar

14. **Mr. Simon Coombs:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he plans to raise with his Spanish counterpart the issue of access to, and egress from, Gibraltar. [27206]

Mr. David Davis: I have made it clear to Mr. Westendorp, the Spanish Foreign Minister in office until this week, that the delays at the Spain-Gibraltar frontier are intolerable and should cease.

Mr. Coombs: Is my hon. Friend aware that the newly appointed Spanish Foreign Minister is quoted as having said that it is not in his interests to sever communications with Gibraltar, but that it is certainly an option. In the light of that comment and of the generally unsatisfactory nature of communications between Spain and Gibraltar, to which my hon. Friend referred, what further reassurance can he give to the people of Gibraltar that the Government will stand by them if the situation deteriorates further?

Mr. Davis: The Government have stood by those people throughout the past decades. Last time the border was severed, it served simply to sour relations between not just Gibraltar and Spain, but the United Kingdom and Spain. We have made a number of points to the Spanish Government on the issue. The argument that they advance is that they are attempting to solve a drug smuggling problem. We have asked them a number of times to give us evidence of any land-based drug smuggling, but we have not received any. We have made the point that, if Spain is serious about dealing with drugs, it should do so through cross-border co-operation, not confrontation.

Mr. Mackinlay: Will the Minister consider remedying the democratic deficit that exists for the people of Gibraltar? The comments that he has uttered need to be uttered in this place by someone who represents the people of Gibraltar. Is there not a case for stating now that there should be limited representation in this House of the people of Gibraltar? Such representatives would be able to defend and argue their case more vigorously. That would signal to the Spanish that we will not tolerate the constant frustration of British people in the Mediterranean.

Mr. Davis: We have not received that request from the people of Gibraltar. The hon. Gentleman and a number of other hon. Members do a good job of putting the case for Gibraltar. That fact is reflected in the answers that I give here and in the opinions of the Spanish Government.

Mr. Colvin: Does my hon. Friend agree that the other matter that must be causing concern in Gibraltar is the further call in the new Spanish Prime Minister's speech for Europe to speak with only one voice on security? That means that Spain will be more closely aligned with France and Germany on security matters. Surely it is important that NATO speaks with one voice on security. Spain has already proved that it can participate in NATO operations, as it is, and has been, doing effectively in former Yugoslavia. Is it not therefore important, in the interests of Britain, NATO and Gibraltar, that Spain becomes a full member of the integrated military structure of NATO?

Mr. Davis: I agree with my hon. Friend on that. I think that such a decision would require a referendum in Spain. We certainly believe that the integrated military structure of NATO would work best with all members of NATO in it—that is clearly right.

European Union

15. **Mr. Barnes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the measures he is taking to improve openness and transparency within the European Union. [27207]

Mr. David Davis: We have supported a number of measures that have increased transparency in the EU—

for example, improved access to Council documents, more open Council debates and publication of Council votes. We shall consider any further ideas that may come forward at the intergovernmental conference.

Mr. Barnes: The Council of Ministers is the only secret legislature in Europe. Would it not be an advantage when, for example, the Foreign Secretary goes to his Council of Ministers meetings, for us to be able to hear his arguments—as when he bluffed it for Britain and tried to argue that corner? It would be of interest not only to hon. Members and the electorate—it might be of considerable interest to the Deputy Prime Minister to know whether the Foreign Secretary was keeping in line with his wishes.

Mr. Davis: There are a couple of things that the hon. Gentleman has wrong. First, the Council of Ministers is not, strictly, a legislature. Secondly, it is not as secretive as he makes it out to be. Since a number of reforms, which we supported, in the past decade, there has been reporting of our decisions, our positions and the votes in Council—and several Council meetings have been televised. I think that the hon. Gentleman hardly has the case right.

Mr. Anthony Coombs: In the interests of transparency and accountability of the European Union, and given its less than helpful attitude towards British farmers in the BSE crisis and the worldwide ban on the export of British beef, does my hon. Friend share the sense of outrage felt by many of my farmers that none other than Herr Fischler, the Agriculture Commissioner, should be opening the royal agriculture show at Stoneleigh this year? Will my hon. Friend make representations to his counterpart at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to ensure that the invitation is cordially and regretfully, but firmly, withdrawn?

Mr. Davis: I commend my hon. Friend on his ingenuity in getting that matter into this question. I hardly think that I have responsibility for royal shows. Information arrived just before Question Time began—so I have not had a chance to check it—that the Commission is proposing to lift the ban on gelatine and tallow at the next agriculture meeting, early next week. I have not seen the details of the proposal, but at least it is one good sign.

Ms Quin: Will the Minister, in the interests of openness, tell us about the letter, which was reported in the press last week, which the Foreign Secretary apparently sent to his Cabinet colleagues, telling them to look at ways in which their Departments could disrupt the European Union? Will such retaliatory action be limited to the European Union, or will it perhaps be extended to countries, such as the United States, that have banned British beef for much longer, but which the Tory Euro-sceptics are strangely silent about? How does such retaliatory action risk affecting British businesses and British economic interests?

Mr. Davis: As a former Minister for open government, I would love to help the hon. Lady. I have seen no such letter, but I can tell her that the Government have to take every measure possible to protect the British beef industry, and we will do so.

Mr. James Hill: Is my hon. Friend aware that there is far too much fraud in the European Union? We have a golden opportunity, next Wednesday, when we discuss in Committee directives on European fraud, for those who wish to record their opinions to do so. The House must tackle this problem because, after all, there is waste in local government and waste in national government, but it is far worse in the Commission.

Mr. Davis: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is too much fraud in the policies of the Union. The Government have taken a major part in dealing with it and in putting in place institutions, such as a Court of Auditors, that are designed to do just that. The problem is that those instruments are not used properly. Most obviously, the European Parliament has only just put in place the first temporary committee of inquiry and the ombudsman. We will have to focus on that sphere very much more in the future.

British Council

16. **Mr. David Marshall:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the timetable for the completion of discussions on the future of British Council posts abroad. [217208]

Mr. Rifkind: We hope to complete the discussions now under way with the British Council shortly.

Mr. Marshall: Do the Government appreciate the value of the British Council to the long-term economy of the United Kingdom? Does the Secretary of State realise that his penny-pinching proposals to reduce the number of countries in which the British Council has offices is counterproductive and will eventually cost us dearly? Will he therefore reconsider that penny wise, pound foolish policy?

Mr. Rifkind: The hon. Gentleman is totally misinformed; the Government have put forward no such proposals. Under the Government, the number of countries in which the British Council operates has increased from 79 to 109 and the number of its offices has increased from 108 to 229. The Government have a clear, firm policy of not wanting any overseas closures, and we are currently working with the British Council to ensure the success of that policy.

European Court of Human Rights

17. **Mr. Whittingdale:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has received about the European Court of Human Rights; and if he will make a statement. [27209]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Sir Nicholas Bonsor): My Department receives a steady stream of correspondence about the European Court of Human Rights.

Mr. Whittingdale: Does my hon. Friend agree that, if a court is to retain its authority and its support, it is important that its judgments should be in tune with the values and instincts of the people who are affected by its rulings? Will he accept that some of the recent judgments of the European Court of Human Rights departed from

that principle? Does he agree that, if that practice continues, there must be a danger that it will call into question the value of our remaining members of it?

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that some of the judgments of the court have been questionable, but the value of our membership goes much wider than the European Court, because the European convention on human rights is the foundation on which the guarantee of human rights throughout Europe is founded. The accession of the new states that have got free of the Soviet Union's clutches make it all the more important that we continue to support the European convention. I hope, however, that we will have an opportunity to review the workings of the European Court of Justice and that the British proposals for changes will be adopted by colleagues.

Points of Order

3.31 pm

Mr. Mike Watson (Glasgow, Central): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I apologise for the fact that, as you are aware, I was not present when my question was called earlier in Question Time. The reason for my absence was that I had not received notification that the Foreign Secretary had decided to link my question with others. I am aware that, under the new procedures introduced last year, a list is posted in the House to inform Members about which questions have been linked.

Given that those questions are submitted two weeks in advance, is it in order that hon. Members who have questions down on the Order Paper—in fact, all hon. Members—are informed of any linkage only on the day when those questions are to be answered? In future, can we not have notice of at least a week before the relevant Question Time?

Madam Speaker: I will keep in mind what the hon. Gentleman said. It is to be regretted that he was not aware, perhaps until the last minute, that his question was to be linked. I tend to know about that by midday, and I should have thought that it would be fairly reasonable for hon. Members to be informed at that time. I plead with all Departments of State to give hon. Members as much notice as possible when questions are linked. That would be reasonable. I should add that I was very generous to the hon. Gentleman today; I realised his difficulty, and called him to ask a supplementary question.

Mr. Hugh Dykes (Harrow, East): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I am sure that the Minister of State made a mistake just now, probably unwittingly, when he referred to the European Court of Justice in his reply.

Madam Speaker: The Minister no doubt stands corrected.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): When the right hon. Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Sir G. Lofthouse) was in the Chair between 1.30 and 2 pm, Madam Speaker, you kindly gave me an Adjournment debate on the circumstances of the murder of Police Constable Yvonne Fletcher. My point of order concerns the behaviour of Ministers, who have repeatedly said that the debate should not have been held nor the television programme made, because of the hurt that it has caused to Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher, the parents of the deceased.

Would it not be in keeping with the honour of the House if Ministers, before they made such statements, at least had the courtesy to ask those parents? Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher were not contacted by the Home Office before those statements were made.

Madam Speaker: That is a matter for the Minister concerned, who wants to respond to that point of order.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Jeremy Hanley): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. I was not the Minister who responded to the debate, but I was present throughout, and I believe that the hon. Member's interpretation of what was said is a travesty of the truth.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness and Sutherland): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I am grateful for your guidance earlier in answering the hon. Member for Glasgow, Central (Mr. Watson). Hon. Members are often involved in work that is associated with their duties as Members of Parliament, and if we are to learn that questions are linked only three and a half hours—[HON. MEMBERS: "Two and a half".]—or two and a half hours before Question Time begins, there is a serious risk that hon. Members will not be aware of Ministers' intentions. That is not desirable, and I wonder whether it is possible to reconsider the matter through the usual channels.

Madam Speaker: If hon. Members have a question on the Order Paper, they should be in their places at 2.30 pm. Hon. Members could read the Order Paper and make an informed guess when they will be called. Information about questions appears on the annunciator screen some hours in advance of Question Time. Nevertheless, I plead with Departments to give hon. Members as much notice of questions as possible. We should not forget that annunciator screens are situated throughout the building, and that hon. Members have only to look at them some time during the morning.

Mr. Jacques Arnold (Gravesham): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Did you notice that I had Question No. 31, and that I attended throughout Question Time on the off-chance that it might be linked with another question and be heard?

Madam Speaker: Yes, and I was generous to the hon. Gentleman too. I noticed that he had a late question, but I called him on an early one.

BILL PRESENTED

HONG KONG (WAR WIVES AND WIDOWS)

Mr. Tim Renton, supported by Mr. Roger Sims, Mr. Edward Garnier, Mr. Tim Yeo, Mr. Cyril Townend, Dr. John Marek and Sir Russell Johnston, presented a Bill to provide for the acquisition of British citizenship by certain women who are Hong Kong residents: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday, 10 May 1996 and to be printed. [Bill 124.]

Part-Time Workers (Maternity Rights)

3.35 pm

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to extend maternity rights to part-time workers; and for connected purposes.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to present the Bill, as I wish to make some very important points. The Bill proposes a simple change in the law regarding maternity allowance. It seeks to abolish the present provision whereby women on the lowest incomes are excluded from statutory maternity allowances. It does that by removing the earnings threshold that limits maternity allowance to those who earn enough to pay national insurance contributions. The present law discriminates against those on the lowest rates of pay and those who work part-time. It perpetuates the idea that the poor and part-timers do not deserve proper rights at work, and it is a shameful anomaly, which should be swept away.

There are few rights more important than the right to maternity pay, which helps parents to ensure that their babies have a good start in life. Few people need to be included in the maternity allowance system more than those mothers who are on the lowest incomes. That fact was recognised by the Education and Employment Committee in its report entitled "Mothers in Employment", which was published in February last year.

Paragraph 36 of the report contains one of the Committee's main conclusions, after considering a great deal of evidence:

"The provision of statutory maternity pay is fundamental to enabling women with dependent children to work. Some of the poorest women with children, who most need to be included in the system of maternity pay, are currently excluded. We recommend that the Government extend rights proportionately to women below the National Insurance threshold."

As one would expect, the Government dealt with that recommendation very briefly in their official reply, which they published in May 1995. They said:

"It has been the practice of all Governments to base eligibility for Statutory Maternity Pay (SNP) and Maternity Allowance (MA) on the requirement to pay national insurance contributions, which is only fair to the taxpayer who meets most of the cost of these benefits. The Government believes that it is wrong for a person to draw on such benefits when they have paid insufficient tax and national insurance contributions. A universal right to maternity pay would be prohibitively expensive and poorly targeted. Women with no other income can claim help from the income support scheme".

A reasonable estimate of the cost is approximately £50 million, which would benefit at least 120,000 women in the United Kingdom each year. The Government response ignores the reason why there is a threshold for employees' national insurance contributions: the law recognises that people below that threshold are least able to pay those contributions. Such people are not evading paying taxes they should pay, or employing accountants and tax consultants to help them find ways of avoiding taxes. These are people whose incomes are considered too low for them to pay such constributions. Since these are the women with the lowest incomes, they are likely to be those who most require maternity pay, yet the law as it stands denies it to them.

The Government say that, if those women have no other source of income, they can always claim help from the income support scheme. That applies to anyone receiving maternity pay, but the Government choose to direct that argument only at the poorest. In fact, it could be used as an argument for abolishing all maternity pay, and even for abolishing all benefits other than income support. That would be an absurd way of approaching the issue, and the Government should come up with a more responsible and sensitive reply.

High on anyone's list of such people must be mothers on low incomes with new-born babies. One would imagine that they might even be high on this Government's list. There is more at stake than the instinct of some Conservative Members to deny rights to the poor; there is the much more widespread prejudice which underlies discrimination against part-timers.

Part-time employees are still widely regarded as not having "real jobs". Even relatively enlightened employers often set up schemes whereby part-timers are referred to as "job-sharing", two people have half each of a fictitious full-time job, as if the only proper jobs were full-time jobs. Part-timers face discrimination in many different ways at the hands of employers who fail adequately to value the hard work done by most part-time employees.

Discrimination takes many different forms. Employers often do not bother to include part-timers in their pension schemes, they may lose out on staff discounts and other benefits available to full-timers, and they are often excluded from training schemes or from being allowed to attend training in work time. The interests of part-timers are frequently ignored when arrangements are made for meetings, and they are usually discriminated against in career promotion. All those forms of discrimination by employers should be made illegal.

On top of all that discrimination by employers, there are further forms of discrimination operated by the Government and the law. The law ought to be on the side of part-timers, not against them, but it is against them today in many ways. My Bill seeks to put right one of those injustices—discrimination in maternity allowances.

As I have said, that is a form of discrimination against part-timers, because, in order to qualify for the threshold income above which one can obtain maternity pay, the lower the number of hours worked each week, the higher the rate of pay has to be. It is hard to think of a system more perfectly designed to discriminate against part-timers. The only exception is part-timers who are on the highest professional rates of pay. Those are the only part-timers against whom the Government do not wish to discriminate.

I have referred to the report of the Select Committee on Education and Employment, which recommended the change in the law that I am introducing in my Bill. One of the organisations that gave evidence to the Committee was the Equal Opportunities Commission. It said:

"We know from research we have commissioned, and from our postbag, that women's patterns of work around childbirth are greatly influenced by financial considerations. If there is no income replacement, or if the level is too low, women may come under pressure to return to work at too early a stage after childbirth. One objective of the establishment of a Statutory Maternity Pay Scheme was to encourage women not to endanger their own or their babies' health by working too late into their pregnancies, or by returning too soon after their babies are born."

A total of 20 per cent. of pregnant working women earn less than the lower earnings limit for national insurance contributions. By any standard, a total of 20 per cent.

[Mr. Elfyn Llwyd]

involves discrimination against many women at a time of great pressure for them, and it also involves many children.

Insisting on applying the contributory principle to those on the lowest earnings is a heartless and insensitive response to a clear case of injustice. There is a clear need for society, through the law, to intervene. I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House will recognise the strength of the case made last year by the Select Committee, which I have today put in the form of an amendment to the law in my Bill.

I have the backing of the Trades Union Congress for the Bill, and I am grateful for its assistance in the Bill's preparation. I am pleased to say that the Bill draws on wide cross-party support, which itself underlines the urgent need for legislation. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Elfyn Llwyd, Ms Roseanna Cunningham, Dr. Joe Hendron, Mr. Dafydd Wigley, Ms Angela Eagle, Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones, Mr. Robert Hicks, Mr. Cynog Dafis, Mr. Simon Hughes, Mrs. Margaret Ewing and Ms Liz Lynne.

PART-TIME WORKERS (MATERNITY RIGHTS)

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd accordingly presented a Bill to extend maternity rights to part-time workers; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday 12 July 1996 and to be printed. [Bill 125.]

Orders of the Day

Opposition Day

[11TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Water Supplies

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment standing in the name of the Prime Minister.

3.45 pm

Mr. Frank Dobson (Holborn and St. Pancras): I beg to move,

That this House deplores the long-term failure of the Government and the privatised water companies to reduce leaks from company pipes and to take other measures to reduce the threat to water supplies this coming summer and notes that they must mend their ways if they are to restore the confidence of consumers without whose co-operation measures to maintain supplies in some parts of the country may fail if there is a prolonged spell of hot dry weather.

If we have average weather this summer, five water companies will be able to maintain supplies only if they extend existing drought measures or take additional action. Those companies are Yorkshire Water, North West Water, South West Water, Southern Water and South East Water. If the summer is hot and dry, 12 companies will need new hosepipe bans and new or additional drought orders to maintain supplies. Those companies are Essex and Suffolk Water, Folkestone and Dover Water, Yorkshire Water, South West Water, North West Water, Severn Trent Water, Southern Water, South East Water, Three Valleys Water, Chester Water, Mid Kent Water and East Surrey and Sutton Water. All of them say that they will not need rota cuts, standpipes or tankering. We all hope that they are right.

The situation that the country faces comes after a very wet winter in 1994-95, a dry summer in 1995 and a dry winter in 1995-96. It is also the product of a complacent Government, a slack system of regulation and the fact that the senior management of the privatised water companies have their minds on other subjects, such as their pay, perks and profits, speculative ventures at home and abroad and a series of takeovers, either proposed, opposed or carried through. No wonder that they have not had the time or the energy to concentrate on their core business of providing a reliable water and sewerage service in the areas in which the Government have given them a monopoly.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Mid–Staffordshire): Is it not the case that since privatisation some £15 billion has been spent on renewing pipes and so on? How much would have been spent by a nationalised industry? The hon. Gentleman mentioned the bosses who are supposed to have earned so much. Precisely what percentage is their income of the total investment of £15 billion that has been spent on new pipes and infrastructure?

Mr. Dobson: The relationship of the bosses' pay to investment is irrelevant to the public's perception of the way in which they have lined their pockets, although they are doing exactly the same jobs as before.

When I say that the Government have given a monopoly to the companies, I mean "given". The new private owners of the privatised water companies paid a total of £5 billion for the shares. In exchange, they got a green dowry of £1.5 billion and a debt write-off totalling £5 billion. That is £6.5 billion, for those who cannot add up. They also got the assets of the water and sewerage industry and a guaranteed income stream as the monopoly suppliers of water, which no human being, animal, plant, business or charity can do without.

One of the assets that the new owners acquired when they took over was the enormous good will of local people, who respected the people who worked for their local water company and who responded readily to appeals for the sensible use of water and for restraint if supplies were short during dry periods. The new owners have squandered that reservoir of public good will and co-operation, just as much as they have squandered water from their reservoirs and pipes.

The reason is easy to see. The public have seen the new water bosses line their pockets at the expense of the customers. They have seen company bosses, encouraged by the Secretary of State, putting more effort into investing in supermarkets at home and various speculative adventures abroad than in ensuring that local people receive a secure supply of water. People in Yorkshire remember that, when concern was expressed about an enormous pay increase for Yorkshire Water bosses, the company's official response was to say, "That's the way it is now."

Consumers have also noted the extraordinary ineptitude of Yorkshire Water's former bosses, the people who claim to be going without a bath. They are the people who propose rota cuts without having thought out how to maintain supplies to the fire brigade. They have not considered how food companies can be expected to clean thousands of gallons by boiling it, when their factories were designed to use clean and safe water straight from the tap.

The public have seen Yorkshire Water's chief executive retired early. It was a case of moving from no bath to an early bath. During the past week, they have seen the torch of aquatic lunacy pass from Yorkshire Water to Severn Trent Water, which has startled many innocent people by advising them to save water by concreting or paving over their lawns. That was advice that the chairman was not intending to follow, as the *Daily Express* discovered when he refused to allow its representatives to concrete over his lawn for free when they turned up with a cement lorry and offered to do the job for him.

We read nearly every day that someone is talking about a water company takeover. The British people are not fools. They know that the last consideration that enters the minds of the takeover movers and shakers is the interests of the customers, the security of water supply, the cleanliness of rivers or beaches and the protection of the environment. The public see water prices increasing. At the same time, they see water companies making record profits, reducing their investment, investing abroad, paying next to no corporation tax, investing in supermarkets, becoming involved in takeovers, getting rid of staff and giving themselves record levels of pay and perks.

The public hear the self-same water companies asking customers to make sacrifices, to exercise restraint and to behave responsibly. People do not like what they hear and see. Their views about the water industry have been ignored for far too long and they can be ignored no longer. That is because the ability of the water companies to maintain supplies this summer will depend on the co-operation of the customers they have insulted.

Greed, sleaze and incompetence have characterised the privatised water industry. As a result, the co-operation that the public used to give the industry will have to be earned all over again. Public co-operation will come about only if customers have respect for those who are asking for sacrifices and co-operation. That co-operation will be forthcoming only if the industry, the regulator and the Government all put their own houses in order, all accept responsibility for what has gone wrong, and stop trying to blame customers, the victims of the crisis, and asking them to shoulder the burden of putting things right.

It will be no use asking customers to exercise individual responsibility and restraint if the companies and their ministerial apologists do not show responsibility and restraint themselves. They must show that they have mended their ways. For a start, the companies should draw in the horns of their diversification programmes, which have diverted so much management time and effort from the core business.

If anyone doubts what I say, he need only read the recent public statements of Thames Water, which has had to write off £95 million, a sum which was lost because of what was described as "ill-fated diversification". That diversification took up so much of the managing director's time that, now that it has been cut, there is no longer a job for him.

Despite the £95 million write-off on diversification and the pay-off to the managing director, Thames Water's profits went up yet again, reaching yet higher—record—levels. Those profits do not come from the diversification; they come from the captive customers of the core business, water and sewerage, which the managing director had been neglecting. Despite the shambles of Yorkshire Water—no one can deny that Yorkshire Water has been a shambles over the past year: so much so that the chairman and chief executive have been dumped—the company's profits still went up. Yorkshire people feel that that cannot be right, and who can blame them? It is not right. If a company is run as incompetently as Yorkshire Water was and still makes record profits, there is something wrong.

Sir Kenneth Carlisle (Lincoln): If the hon. Gentleman's party should gain office, will he take specific steps to stop water companies becoming involved in diversification?

Mr. Dobson: We will certainly use the powers that the Secretary of State currently possesses, under water industry legislation passed by the present Government, to ensure that the water companies discharge their duties to provide efficient and secure water supplies and to look after the environment. The Secretary of State can take direct action to do that.

Another development that is distracting the senior management of water companies from their basic task is the rash of takeovers and rumours of takeovers. Northumbrian Water, which has been subject to a takeover, admitted that its takeover by North Eastern Water occupied at least half the time of senior

[Mr. Dobson]

management, and we can assume that the same applied in North West Water, South West Water, Wessex Water, Severn Trent Water and Welsh Water, all of which have been making or resisting takeover bids.

Sir Jim Spicer (West Dorset): As the hon. Gentleman will know, Wessex Water has put in a bid for South West Water. Both companies happen to be in my constituency. If the hon. Gentleman were in my constituency, would he welcome a takeover of South West Water by Wessex Water—or is he going to interfere with that, halting the natural flow and preventing a union that should have happened in the first instance?

Mr. Dobson: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's criticism of the privatisation legislation that created the present ragbag arrangement, but he had better make pretty sure that his constituents who are currently supplied by Wessex Water do not end up subsidising the proceedings if Wessex Water takes over South West Water.

Will Wessex Water promise to bring down the price for South West Water? That is the main concern. Will there be a universality of price between the two companies? If so, there is no doubt that the customers of Wessex Water will be subsidising those of South West Water. I do not know what the hon. Gentleman will say about his difficult problem.

The Secretary of State for the Environment (Mr. John Gummer): I have listened carefully to the hon. Gentleman's attacks on the privatised water industry. Will he tell us whether, if there were a Labour Government, the privatised industry would be returned to national control?

Mr. Dobson: I have said this at the Dispatch Box before, and I will say it again. If we could afford it, we would carry out the clear will of the people and return the industry to public ownership, but we will not be able to afford it, so we must ensure that the industry is regulated in the interests of customers and the environment. *[Laughter.]* I do not know why the Secretary of State is laughing; that is a perfectly straightforward statement. We are stuck with what we have got.

Mr. Gummer: What that statement shows is that the Labour party knows perfectly well that it would not be able to invest the necessary amount in improving the infrastructure, as the privatised system has. That is what the hon. Gentleman has told the House. Now we know.

Mr. Dobson: I do not think that the right hon. Gentleman can conclude that from what I have said. If, in fairness to the taxpayer, we bought the industry back at the ludicrous price for which the right hon. Gentleman and his mates sold it to their mates in the City, we would have no problems; but that, I think, would be confiscation.

The present system of water regulation depends to a large extent—Conservative Members should bear the point in mind, because they established the system—on comparing the performance of one water company with another. Takeovers are bound to make that more difficult, by reducing the number of organisations that can be compared. Indeed, the water regulator has expressed concern about the diminishing number of comparators, and his fear that customers may suffer.

As a result, the amalgamation of water companies with electricity companies has another disadvantage to customers—this time as taxpayers. Such amalgamations allow the tax liabilities of one part of the new combined company to be offset against investment by another part. The result is that the combined company pays less tax. If those companies pay less tax, the rest of us will have to pay more. It is estimated that the amalgamation of the two north-west companies has resulted in a saving in corporation tax of anywhere between £30 million and £60 million.

Mr. Doug Hoyle (Warrington, North): My hon. Friend has referred to the takeover of NORWEB by North West Water, forming United Utilities. That has led to the loss of up to 5,000 jobs without consultation. Is he also aware that North West Water is doing something else? In parts of the north-west, such as my constituency, it has installed about 121 card meters, 102 of which are in council properties, yet it has not sought the permission of, or consulted, the local authority.

When a person has bought the card and used up the amount on it, the water supply is disconnected. Previously, the water company had to go to court to get a disconnection. Is that process legal? Is it not another scandalous example of what wealthy and greedy companies—particularly North West Water—are doing?

Mr. Dobson: As my hon. Friend will know, a case is being pursued against North West Water, because people are concerned that the company might be breaking the law in depriving people of water without the courts' consent, which everyone previously assumed was required.

It is worth remembering that the Save the Children Fund produced a report—it is a good indication of the state of the country—that says:

> "As a society, for the past 150 years in the UK, we have made a priority of access to clean water for all our citizens. Historically, it has been seen as unacceptable for families not to be able to afford water. Why has this suddenly changed, and without proper discussion for such a change in public health policy?"

I did not say that: the Save the Children Fund did.

In the north-west, North West Water has taken over North West Electricity, but the people there, whose bills provide the income for both water and electricity businesses, have been told that, for the rest of this century, all the benefits will flow to shareholders and not to them, although my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney) has a letter from Ofwat saying that that is not true. I do not know whether the bosses of the new United Utilities are trying to con the shareholders, the public, or a combination of both, or do not know what they are talking about.

It is worth bearing in mind that North West Water prices have risen by 7 per cent.—well above the national average—in the past year. North West Electricity prices have risen by 5 per cent.—far higher than the increase in any other electricity company in the country. The Government and the regulators appear to have a down on people in the north-west, who are being asked to pay

bigger and bigger price increases without being offered any protection by any of the regulatory bodies, least of all the Government.

The only thing that seems to be coming down in relation to United Utilities is the number of staff. Estimates of job cuts going through at present range from 2,000 to 5,000. Most people in the north-west believe that the management of North West Water should have been spending its time reducing leaks and guaranteeing supplies rather than concentrating on takeovers.

Mr. Gummer: The House did not have a chance to dwell on what the hon. Gentleman said about profits. Is it not true that, if the water companies were as they were—nationalised—or renationalised, as the hon. Gentleman would like, they would pay no tax and make no profits, and instead ask the Exchequer to donate large sums of public money so that they could deliver the necessary investment? The hon. Gentleman cannot have it both ways. The present system provides money for all the good purposes on which the hon. Gentleman and I agree.

Mr. Dobson: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's every complacent appearance at the Dispatch Box. Apparently, we are living in a sort of water nirvana. The only problem for the Secretary of State and his friends is that that is not how the public see it. North West Water is rolling in money.

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): Will my hon. Friend comment on the Secretary of State's apparent amnesia about what happened before privatisation? The Secretary of State seems to have forgotten that, before privatisation, the Government prevented the water authorities, as they then were, from investing. They were told that they could not afford it, but the Government gave the privatised companies a present of more than £1 billion from the green dowry. If that could be given to the privatised companies, why could it not have been given when those bodies were in the public sector?

Mr. Dobson: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I remind Conservative Members that no Opposition Member voted for the nationalisation of the water industry. The Tory Government and the Secretary of State for the Environment voted to take the water industry out of the hands of local authorities, which had run it well for more than 100 years. They nationalised it because they could not think of anything else to do after their ludicrous reorganisation of local government.

North West Water was rolling in money. It must have been, because it found £1.7 billion to buy North Western Electricity, and then had the cheek to claim that the money did not come from water customers. But it always comes from the customers in the end. The capital and income stream from North West Water's non-water business is negligible. Its takeover depended entirely on being backed by the capital and income stream of the water and sewerage businesses.

The company's borrowing will be repaid by water customers, as the company chairman, Sir Desmond Pitcher, so elegantly stated in a letter to my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney):

"Debt repayment will be made from the inherent cash flows of the business."

Presumably he could not get his tongue around, "It will be paid by the customers."

Let us be clear about this matter. The main reason for the rise in the cost of water is not operating costs or investment. The industry is organised so that there is a holding company at the top, to which the water service company pays large amounts. An examination of the increase in the cost of water plainly shows where the increased cost is being incurred. The main cause is the money that is being creamed off from the water and sewerage company to the parent company at the top. Since 1991-92, while contributions to maintenance costs have risen by 8 per cent. and operating costs have risen by 3 per cent., the money that has been creamed off to the parent companies has risen by 36 per cent.

Another problem with takeovers is that they make it so much easier for the utilities that are involved to confuse the regulators and the public about their true costs and profits. It is complexity leading to obscurity, and it was bad enough before the takeovers. I shall give an example of the inability of a regulator to spot money that was being squirrelled away before the takeover process got under way. The electricity regulator said publicly that he was shocked when he discovered that Northern Electric, faced with a takeover bid, had managed to assemble a £530 million fighting fund to resist the bid. That forced him to review his pricing formula for the whole of the electricity industry.

The regulator had got it wrong because he could not understand the books. At that time, he was looking only at the books of simple, straightforward electricity companies. How much more difficult will it be for the regulators after amalgamations and takeovers? Where companies have amalgamated either with other water companies or with other utilities, the customers of both will be rightly suspicious that that will enable the companies to hide the scale of their profits from the regulators, which is fairly easy, and to try to hide the scale of their profits from the public, which seems to be much more difficult. I call on the Secretary of State, therefore, to force the companies to throw open their books. The public want transparency, not obscurity.

If they want customer co-operation this summer, the companies will have to avoid any further exploitation of their profitable position. It is rumoured that, despite all the things that have gone wrong there, Yorkshire Water is so rolling in money that it is contemplating a major buy-back of shares. It is safe to predict that, if it does so, many customers in Yorkshire will decide that a company that is throwing around that sort of money will have to solve its water supply problems on its own. Any lack of corporate restraint by Yorkshire Water will undermine only its calls for customer restraint, and it will have an impact throughout the country, not just in Yorkshire.

Above all, if the water companies want public support if there is a drought this summer, they must deal with leaks from their own pipes, the principal waste of water in this country. The most spectacular example involves South West Water. It will not be able to persuade local people to save water if it does not put a stop to lunacies such as sending 1 billion gallons of water from the Roadford reservoir down the river out to sea. Admittedly, that was a more spectacular example than the day-to-day drip of waste, but that day-to-day drip is going on

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throughout the country. We know that, every minute, the companies are wasting 500,000 gallons of water from their pipes.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dobson: I shall not at the moment.

In the waste of water, Yorkshire Water, North West Water, Severn Trent Water and Thames Water are the principal culprits. Nothing much was done about that scandal until we exposed it last summer. It was not until then that the water industry, the regulator or the Government acknowledged even that water leakage from company pipes was a major problem.

I have considered water company annual reports for the three years before last year's crisis. Leaks were not even mentioned in North West Water's annual reports in any of the three years preceding last year's crisis. Nor were leaks mentioned in Yorkshire Water's annual reports over that period. Other company reports over the period referred to leaks, but they were leaks by customers, to which they wanted to draw attention.

The same applied to the regulator's annual reports. He mentioned only leaks by customers and the need to do something about those leaks. There was not a word about leaks from companies' pipes, despite the fact that they represent about 80 per cent. of total water leaked.

Mr. Gummer: Will the hon. Gentleman tell me of the occasions when leaks in the nationalised water companies were mentioned, apart from one in 1911?

Mr. Dobson: I simply cannot afford to employ seven civil servants to go back to 1911. I have been considering the period since the industry was privatised, on terms that the Secretary of State appears to think were good.

We have always said that dealing with leaks was the quickest way of saving water, a view backed by the National Rivers Authority. At first, the industry and its Government apologists denied that. Their next statement was that £4 billion was being invested in dealing with leaks, which was a total lie: £4 billion was being invested in anything to do with water, which might, by accident, have reduced leaks. When we checked to find out what was being spent on detecting and dealing with leaks by getting in touch with every company, the total in England was £68 million. That, however, was from eight of the companies, because the ninth could not even tell us.

We have called on the Secretary of State to set mandatory leakage targets for the water companies, and he has refused to do so. He will rely on them, he says, to set their own targets. They have done so, and what do we find? Let us consider the principal culprits among the companies.

According to a parliamentary answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Mrs. Jackson)—I pay tribute to all her work on this matter—although some companies are aiming for a 10 per cent. leakage rate by the year 2000, North West Water says that it aims to reduce its leakage to 22 per cent. by 2000, and Yorkshire Water says that it aims to reduce its leakage to 20 per cent "in the longer term", however long that may be. Apparently the Secretary of State is satisfied with those targets, which are an insult to water customers in the north-west and Yorkshire. I fear that, when there is an appeal to local people to save water, they will probably say that a spot of DIY is required from the companies before they will do anything.

In a further answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Hillsborough, the Government said that, during the latter part of 1995 and the first four months of 1996, the privatised water companies had announced additional investment of over £400 million—that figure is mentioned in the Government's complacent amendment to our motion—in developing water resources and improving the distribution network.

No one should be fooled by that statement; it does not mean that the money is being spent on dealing with leaks. When I checked about two hours ago with the Water Services Association—at present, one could say that it represents nine and a half of the major companies, because one of them is leaving—it said that none of the £400 million was being spent specifically on detecting and mending leaks.

Another problem with the Government's figure is that they do not specify the period over which the investment is taking place. For all I know, the money could all be for spending this summer—or this year, at least—or it may be spread over two or three years. Perhaps the Secretary of State will clarify the timetable.

If the water companies are to command support and a proper response from the public, they will have to mend their ways—and so will Ministers. The Government's record has been pathetic. For years, they ignored the leaks from company pipes and put the blame on customers. Labour Members of Parliament were told in the House by Ministers that customers were responsible for most of the leaks. That was a lie, which was told because the Government had been pursuing a secret agenda to force everybody on to water meters, and had never given proper attention to the leaks from company pipes.

When the Environment Act 1995 was a Bill, Ministers introduced an amendment to require the efficient use of water by customers, but rejected a Labour call to extend that requirement to the water companies. My hon. Friend the Member for Hillsborough was treated with contempt by the Minister who dealt with the issue. She had made a wise suggestion, so I suppose that is why it was rejected.

A little later in the summer, the Government produced a document entitled, "Using Water Wisely", containing 71 paragraphs of their deep and learned thoughts on that subject. Of the 71 paragraphs, 56 were devoted to water conservation by customers, including 29 on metering for customers. Only nine paragraphs were devoted to company leaks, and some of those were used to reject the idea of mandatory standards for leakage.

Sad to say, the water regulator has not performed much better. At the end of December, he had to admit:

"Ofwat has been looking more closely at companies' leakage forecasts made in 1989"—

at the time of privatisation—

"and whether they have been achieved. In many cases reductions planned and paid for"—

by the customers—

"in the price limits set in 1989 have not been achieved".

The regulator should have been keeping a closer eye on what was happening. It should not have taken a campaign by the Opposition to get him to do his job properly and

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find out that money taken from customers on the understanding that it would be spent on dealing with leaks was not being used for that purpose.

I have also looked at what the companies said in 1989; in the light of what I am about to say, the Secretary of State may need to change his amendment ever so slightly. The prospectus for Yorkshire Water is most interesting. Prospectuses are supposed to contain the truth; to put falsehoods into a prospectus when floating a company is a criminal offence, so I must assume that Yorkshire Water was telling the truth when it recorded that, in the five years before privatisation, the publicly owned water authority reduced leakage by 20 per cent.

When we look at the comparable figures for today, it would appear that, if the new privatised company's figures were accurate, and the prospectus was truthful—I accept no responsibility for either—leakage in Yorkshire has now increased. The National Rivers Authority, to be fair, was concerned for a long time about the levels of leakage and the capacity of the industry to maintain supplies in hot, dry weather without damaging the environment by abstraction from lakes, rivers and bore holes. There is little evidence that the NRA's warnings were taken seriously by the industry or by the Government.

Perhaps that was what the new chief executive of the Environment Agency—which has taken over from the NRA—meant when he said:

"If we're perfectly frank, the National Rivers Authority was perhaps too independent from government. As a result, it was left out of some important decisions. How independent you are affects how much the Government trusts you".

If that was not what he meant, perhaps the Secretary of State will tell us what other important decisions the NRA was left out of.

I hope that that most revealing statement by the new head of the Environment Agency does not signal a move away from the attitude of the NRA, whose independent and hard-hitting reports were welcomed by everyone concerned with water supplies and the aquatic environment. The first report from the Environment Agency on drought seems to be more complacent about the likely position this summer than the last report produced by the NRA on the subject, which was published in February.

The new report took a less robust attitude than the NRA report towards possible future drought orders. I sincerely hope that this does not mean that the NRA has been nobbled by the industry or the Government—or both—now that it is a part of the Environment Agency. In any case, the Secretary of State has some explaining to do.

The people of this country want action from the Government, and action that is not directed against them as customers. They want practical proposals that will work, not flights of fantasy such as we heard from the Prime Minister the last time he was in Yorkshire. When speaking to the Tory Central Council in Harrogate—it says "Horrogate" in my notes—

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): That's because Lamont has got the nomination for Harrogate.

Mr. Dobson: My hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover is referring to the rumour that the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Thames (Mr. Lamont) got the nomination in Harrogate because he went into the selection meeting and sang, "Je ne regrette nowt."

If I may return to the subject of the debate, the Prime Minister said in Harrogate:

"We are going to introduce competition into the water industry."

How the Tory faithful clapped. But no one else was taken in. The proposed scheme involves the possibility of some major industrial users who are located near the borders of a privatised water company getting water from a neighbouring company. The chances of that being extended to domestic customers are negligible, as, to be fair, the Secretary of State admitted the day after. Indeed, there is a possibility that domestic customers might suffer if cut-price supplies are offered to major industrial users, either by a new supplier or by an existing supplier trying to keep its business.

The Government have not yet extended competition for domestic customers to the electricity industry, although electricity is a standard product, and can be transported cheaply via the national grid. In the case of water, there is no grid. Water is not a standard product, and it is very expensive to transport over long distances, especially if it involves pumping from one watershed to another. The concept of competition becomes even less practicable when applied to sewage—another function of the companies. Sewage is certainly not a standard product, it has no grid, and it would be even more expensive to transport over long distances. People do not want any more daft interventions from the Prime Minister; they want a system that puts the interests of the environment and customers first.

Today, time does not permit us to devote ourselves to a proper consideration of the long-term future of the water industry—that must come later. In the meantime, we urge the Government to implement a six-point plan to restore consumer confidence in the water industry and to help avoid a crisis this summer.

We ask the Government to implement the following: that the water companies should be set mandatory targets for reducing leakages from company pipes; that the water companies should offer a free repair service to domestic customers; that customers should be offered free advice and help on other methods of saving water; that companies should be required to compensate customers for the interruption to normal supplies; that the Government should place a moratorium on water company takeovers for the time being; and that no licences for increased abstraction should be granted except where companies can demonstrate that there is absolutely no alternative.

The water companies could take on staff to carry out these vital tasks, and they have no excuse for not doing so. They may be short of water, but they are rolling in money. It is about time that they used that money to look after the environment and the interests of their customers. Nothing less will do.

4.26 pm

The Secretary of State for the Environment (Mr. John Gummer): I beg to move, to leave out from "House" to the end of the Question and to add instead thereof:

"welcomes the fact that, in the past year of severe drought in many areas, normal water supplies have been maintained with only limited restrictions, in contrast to 1976 when supplies were cut off for large

parts of each day for over 1 million people for nearly two months; notes that under public ownership the water authorities did not invest sufficiently in infrastructure, causing pollution of beaches and the sea, high leakage rates, and drinking water of significantly poorer quality than today; notes that since privatisation in 1989 the water companies have invested over £17 billion in greatly improving their operations, efficiency and service to customers; notes the assessment of the Environment Agency that the measures taken so far by the private companies should be sufficient to maintain supplies in the coming summer, even if it is very dry, with limited further restrictions; notes that those companies have since last autumn put in hand more than £400 million of investment to ensure supplies; and commends the water regulator, the Environment Agency (and its predecessor, the National Rivers Authority), and the Government for the action that they have taken separately and jointly to enable the companies to meet their supply obligations both in the short and the longer term.".

This week, the two most trivial contributions to the water debate have been Severn Trent's advice to its customers to concrete over their lawns and the speech of the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson). No other person in Europe could speak on the environment and discuss water without referring to climate change, to the problems of sustainable development and to the issues that face this nation and this planet.

The hon. Gentleman had to read the speech written by his research assistant—he could not even read the word "Harrogate" without noticing that his research assistant could not spell it. Today, the hon. Gentleman did himself no good in the way that he introduced the motion. He does not want to explain the system that he would like us to have. If he wants to be taken seriously, he must explain his preferred system for the water industry, how it would work and what it would deliver.

I shall look at the system that the hon. Gentleman supported and wanted to continue. If we consider how that system dealt with a drought and compare it with the present system, we shall get some idea of the excellence of the improvements, how far we have to go and what we ought to do. I refer to the last summer that was comparable with last year's summer and with the one that we may have this year. The summer of 1976, with a lengthy drought, showed beyond doubt that the municipal and nationalised system of the preceding years failed to keep up with demand.

In 1976, 40,000 properties in north Devon had to have their water supply turned off completely for two weeks, there were standpipes in the streets and 1 million people in south Wales were subjected to cuts for up to 17 hours a day for two months. That is what happened when there was a drought under the system supported by the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Gummer: I wish to say something that I am sure the hon. Lady will want to hear, and then I shall give way to her. In 1976 the then Labour Minister of State, Department of the Environment, Denis Howell, said:

"There are a number of lessons to be learned as a result of this year's experience."

He was referring to the experience of nationalised water companies in 1976. He continued:

"I am asking the National Water Council"—

do hon. Members remember that august body?—

"in collaboration with my Department, to carry out a detailed study"—

not of the six points put forward by the hon. Gentleman—

"of the relative merits of different forms of water rationing by standpipe and by rota cuts".—[*Official Report*, 16 November 1976; Vol. 919, c. 1113.]

He also asked the council to examine other aspects of the emergency measures. In defence of a nationalised water system, the Labour Government said that the only way to get through a year's drought—which was less severe than last year's—was by introducing water rationing, standpipes and rota cuts.

Mrs. Campbell *rose*—

Mrs. Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough) *rose*—

Mr. Gummer: I want to give way to the hon. Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell) because last time she interrupted me in a water debate, she did not know that Cambridge was supplied not by the Anglian water company, but by the Cambridge water company, and I had to correct her.

Mrs. Campbell: I am speechless at what the Secretary of State has just said, which is not true. I never made that mistake and would not do so.

In the winter before the drought of 1976, the average rainfall for England and Wales was down to 63 per cent. of the long-term average. In 1995, the rainfall, as a percentage of the long-term rainfall, was 138 per cent. That shows that the nationalised industry coped well in 1976, whereas the privatised industry of 1995 failed lamentably.

Mr. Gummer: Having heard the hon. Lady's comment, I think that the weather girl's job is safe. The hon. Lady should look carefully at the facts. I should also ask her to look in *Hansard*, because I think that she will find that, on my other point, I was right and she was wrong.

During a year in which many areas suffered a worse drought than in 1976, not one person had to be supplied by a standpipe and there were no rota cuts. The Labour Government did not introduce a Bill to stop leakages or to provide greater investment, but introduced an emergency Bill to enable the water authorities not to supply water.

Mrs. Jackson: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Gummer: I shall give way in a moment, but I am sure that the hon. Lady will want to know that, having experienced such a difficult year, one would expect the Labour party, in power, to say, "The one thing that we have got to do now is to make the sort of investment necessary to ensure that that does not happen again next year." Did the Labour Government do that? They did precisely the opposite: they slashed investment in the water industry. The very next year they had a six-month moratorium on investment in the water industry.

The figures clearly show that investment in the publicly owned water industry fell from about £2.3 billion in 1974-75—at 1993-94 prices—to about £1.3 billion in real terms in 1979-80. The worst year was the year after the

drought. The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras is wrong to complain about the significant investment that should be made this year after last year's difficulties. I shall give him the detailed figures for the extra investment this year. He failed to tell the House that when the water companies were run as he wanted, the Labour Government, far from investing in those companies after a drought, actually cut the investment and, for six months, made no investment.

Mrs. Jackson: The Secretary of State is being mischievous and misleading. Will he deny the figures printed in *Hansard* last week, which show that the capacity of the reservoirs in March 1995 fluctuated between 95 and 100 per cent. full? Does he accept that that was not the case in 1976? Yet by the end of August 1995, there was talk of standpipes in Yorkshire. In four months, one company had come to the end of its reserves through mismanagement. Does the Secretary of State accept that those figures show that last year's situation was totally different from that in 1976?

Mr. Gummer: The figures show quite clearly that, in 1976, for up to two months, 1 million people did not have water for 17 hours a day, 40,000 people were taking their water from standpipes and the Government of the day had an answer to the problem, which was to ration water and to cut investment in infrastructure. That is what the figures show. The hon. Lady should not express an attitude that clearly demonstrates that she would support everything that a nationalised company would do—including taking water away from people—but that she does not accept the real facts, which are that, during the whole of last year, no one had to go to a standpipe and there were no rota cuts.

Sir Jim Spicer: Can we again consider what happened in 1976 and re-examine another figure? In the Wessex area, leakages in 1976 were running at about 40 per cent., or probably a little higher than that. Does not that add fuel to what my right hon. Friend has already said about a lack of action? One would think that, if that figure were repeated across the country, the one thing that the rainmaker would concentrate on would be saying, in the following year, "We must do more to stop those leakages."

Mr. Gummer: My hon. Friend is unfair to the then Government. If he remembers, the then Minister responsible for the water industry—now Lord Howell—was able to do a rain dance; that rain dance was done and as a result we had lots of rain. I admit to the House that I do not have that ability, and I am sorry about it. But there is no doubt that the Labour party would do such a dance, because it would not invest in the water industry or be able to solve the problem with technology. Clearly, in the past it resorted to magic.

The fact is that last year, some areas experienced more extreme drought, more extreme temperatures and certainly higher demand from domestic customers than in 1976. But there were no standpipes anywhere and no rota cuts, and restrictions were limited to hosepipe bans and limitations.

Of course, there were areas where water was tankered in last year, but does anyone think that a Labour Government would have been able to provide sufficient funds to do that? They certainly did not do it in 1976. They could have tankered in water to all those people in Wales and to all those people in the west country, but they did not, would not and could not because they did not have the money or the competence to do so. All they said was, "We shall ration water for more people." But that is what socialists always do. In the end, they always blame the customer and tell the customer that the only way to deal with the problem is to ration the supply.

Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe (Bradford, South): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gummer: No. I have a little more to say before I give way to the hon. Gentleman, but I shall certainly do so.

We are now contemplating a second difficult, particularly dry year. I only wonder whether anyone seriously suggests that a nationalised industry would be able to match the capital expenditure that water companies currently have in hand. I am talking not about money spent over a long period, but about that which is being invested now. Severn Trent Water is investing £100 million; North West Water, £53 million; Thames Water, £35 million; Yorkshire Water, £171 million; Southern Water, £32 million; South West Water, £20 million; and Welsh Water and Anglian Water are investing £10 million each. More than £400 million is being invested by those companies to be able more effectively to guarantee water supplies. On top of that can be added the extra revenue spent on leakage control.

No one really believes that, today, under any Government, an extra £500 million would be provided for the water industry from the taxpayer's pocket. The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras was naive when he said that, because of a particular amalgamation, he feared that less money might be generated through corporation tax for the taxpayer. The system that the hon. Gentleman prefers would provide no money for the taxpayer, but would demand large sums from him. That money was not forthcoming in the past, which is why all the necessary investment that I listed has had to take place now. No investment was made when the taxpayer was responsible for funding the water companies, and those taxpayers would certainly not provide the extra £500 million mentioned today.

Mr. Dobson: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gummer: I shall give way, but I just want the hon. Gentleman to comment on yesterday's speech by the water regulator, who said, although I do not think that he was talking directly about the hon. Gentleman:

> "It is fashionable to criticise the water companies for their performance in last summer's drought, but some did well and overall the companies coped better than the water authorities had in comparable situations in the past . . . The water companies have subsequently increased investment and increasingly are getting to grips with leakage. In both cases they are spending more money without any increase in price limits."

Mr. Dobson: I have to say that Ian Byatt, the water regulator, whom I have known for 30 years, is as much part and parcel of the current inadequate system as is the Secretary of State. He does not exactly have an open mind, because he is in favour of the system that he regulates. I quoted him, and he has some explaining to do

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on why he did not pay attention to the money which customers paid in to control leaks and which was not spent on that work. Apparently, he noticed that omission only in December last year.

The Secretary of State keeps going on about money from the taxpayer, so can he tell us how much the nationalised water industry received from the taxpayer? Does it compare with the £6.5 billion gift from the taxpayer to the new owners at the time of privatisation?

Mr. Gummer: I have already given the hon. Gentleman the relevant figures on investment in the nationalised water industry. The funds then raised were not sufficient to enable it to carry out the necessary work. Since privatisation, large sums have gone into investment and as a result there has been a significant improvement in the quality of the water delivered.

Mr. Dobson: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gummer: Just a moment. The hon. Gentleman must tell us something: what would his favourite system have done instead of what has been achieved under the current system? Would he have spent more taxpayers' money on investment in the water industry, or would he have spent it in different ways? Does he think that the companies should not have spent what they did spend or that they should have spent it on something else? What would he have done? Would he have doubled expenditure by the taxpayer if he had been in charge? Unless he can tell us those answers, he cannot start to criticise what has happened since privatisation.

Mr. Dobson: Did the taxpayer contribute anything to the capital investment programme of the 10 publicly owned water authorities? If so, how much?

Mr. Gummer: The hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well that, over the years, investment in our infrastructure has been paid for in some cases by the municipal taxpayer, in some cases by the general taxpayer and in others by those who invested—

Mr. Dobson: He does not know the answer.

Mr. Gummer: With great respect, if the hon. Gentleman listened to the answer, he would learn more from one sentence than he was able to tell the House in his entire speech. Much of the investment was paid for by the customer, but the only way in which the necessary £400 million investment could have been generated before privatisation was through the taxpayer. The hon. Gentleman knows that perfectly well. He knows perfectly well that no Labour Government would have been able to deliver that. I know that that is true, because his alter ego, the then Minister responsible for the water industry, said in order to explain away the drought problem in the disastrous year of 1976:

> "The fact that we were able to survive the drought . . . with no significant effect on industry and employment, though with hardship to some domestic customers and some effect on food prices, is a reasonably satisfactory outcome."

That is what happens when Labour looks after Britain's water industry: we have higher food prices, water rationing, water cuts and water from standpipes. Of course, we could not afford to tanker in water during times of difficulty and there would be no hope of investment. That is what we would get under a nationalised system run by Labour.

The hon. Gentleman had the effrontery to come to the House and complain about a system that ensured that last year—when we experienced the most difficult climatic combination of heat and lack of moisture—nobody was on a standpipe and nobody failed to get water.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Gummer: I have now upset Opposition Members, so I shall continue my speech and upset them a little more. The system that the hon. Gentleman advocates did not deliver the goods in the 1970s. There is another reason why it did not do that. The nationalised system had no regulation at all. For example, drinking water quality was entirely a matter for those who owned the industry—that is, the Government.

The Government both controlled the industry and its investment and decided upon standards of drinking water. When the industry was privatised, a drinking water inspectorate was established in order to ensure that no short cuts were taken with drinking water quality. As a result, water quality is significantly better now than under a nationalised industry. We separated the chap who set the standards from those who had to pay for it.

The same is true of the Environment Agency and the National Rivers Authority. The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras referred to what his research assistant had dug out and what he would think about the issue now—I hope that his research assistant will do a little more digging—but he did not mention what happened previously. When there was no Environment Agency and no National Rivers Authority, if the water organisations wanted to take water from a river, no one insisted that they reach agreements on environmental grounds. The hon. Gentleman calls the current system bad, but in the past there was no independent National Rivers Authority or Environment Agency. The water authorities could take what water they liked from the environment and turn a blind eye to the pollution that they caused. We have introduced those important changes. I seem to have upset Opposition Members tremendously, so I shall give way to the hon. Member for Truro (Mr. Taylor).

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro): A little earlier, the Secretary of State said that the water companies had found an extra £400 million without increasing prices. Does that not suggest that the price regulation system has failed, as customers were told that they were charged the minimum price allowable on the then rate of investment?

Mr. Gummer: The water companies have other areas of activity from which they derive other sources of income. They are regulated extremely tightly and, when those regulations do not seem tight enough, they can be screwed down—which has occurred—by the water regulator.

Two more factors control the water companies now which did not exist before. The Director General of Water Services is able to ensure that customers do not have to pay if it is not right that they do so. The extra investment undertaken by the companies must come out of the

pockets of the shareholders, rather than the customers. That is what happens now; that is why we have a regulator of that sort.

There was no mechanism whereby one could get enough investment under the nationalised industry. Nationalised industry investment counted against the total amount of public investment that could be spent. As a consequence, the water companies were constantly prevented from investing. That is why the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Healey, introduced a moratorium: the water companies were the easiest to hit. We cannot do that now, partly because the companies derive their money from the market and partly because the water regulator ensures that the money is spent properly.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) *rose—*

Mr. Gummer: I shall just finish this before giving way.

The water regulator is there to ensure that if there are signs of mismanagement by the companies, they are taken over in the sense that they are inquired into. The Office of Water Services has dealt with three cases, including Yorkshire Water, and we shall be seeing its independent conclusions very soon.

I do not believe that the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras does public life any good by attacking the independence of those who are recognised as wholly independent outsiders. The hon. Gentleman should recognise that this country relies on civil servants and independent regulators to be independent. By attacking anybody with whom he disagrees and saying that they are biased, he is showing, once again, his inability to distinguish party political campaigning from any pretence at trying to forward the interests of the nation or the water customer.

Mr. Sheerman: The right hon. Gentleman's mindset is wrong. He keeps saying that the Government owned the water supply system. Does not he mean that the people owned it—not some of the people, not Americans or French, but the people of this country? We now have something very different, but the right hon. Gentleman cannot begin to understand the difference between Government ownership and ownership by the people.

Mr. Gummer: The people may have owned the system, but they could not get water. They were rationed and had to use standpipes. They may have owned it, but they were cut off for two weeks and nobody would tanker any water to them. Whether they owned it or not, they did not get any water. That is what happened when it was nationalised under a Labour Government. They knew that they could cover themselves in their usual nonsense, saying, "As long as you own it, it is okay."

We know what it means to own the water supply system under Labour, because Denis Howell made it clear. It means water rationing by standpipe, rota cuts, emergency measures, some hardship to domestic customers and effects on food prices—I do not think that that meant that they would go down. Under the Labour party, ownership means that people do not get what they want.

The companies are now run much more efficiently and there is significantly greater investment. People can get the water that they want. In fact, more people get more water because their demands are greater.

Mr. Burden *rose—*

Mr. Gummer: I shall give way in a moment.

As a result of the action taken by the companies and the regulator, the judgment of the independent Environment Agency is that it should be possible to maintain normal supplies if the summer is normal. It does not envisage a need for rota cuts, standpipes or even tankering if there is another very dry summer. We are talking about the possibility of two significantly drier than normal summers, one after the other, and under the privatised system, nobody will have to resort to standpipes or find themselves cut off for 17 out of 24 hours. In other words, we have shown clearly that, instead of dealing with the situation in the way that the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras would have wanted, under privatisation, we shall deliver the water to the people.

Mr. Terry Rooney (Bradford, North): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Gummer: I must get on.

That does not mean that everything that is done is good. I have criticised water companies for particular actions. However, there has been a lack of rainfall and that has had a severe impact on water stocks. The House should remember that since March 1995, some places have missed out on the equivalent of five months' rainfall. There is no doubt about the severity of the drought.

The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras did not mention in his speech how he would cope with the drought. He did not mention what was really happening before the water companies were privatised. I am sorry that I do not have a chance to take the hon. Gentleman on a trip round Britain. He might not enjoy it, but I would enjoy it enormously. I would like to take him to Cleethorpes, Mablethorpe, Cromer and Sheringham, to Sutton on Sea and West Mersea, to show him where the filth went out of the pipe straight on to the beaches and to show him where people could not swim and would not let their children swim because of the filth that was still allowed by the water companies that his party supported in their nationalised state. I should like to take him round those places, because I should like him to learn a thing or two. I reckon that it would be worth all the hassle to do so.

I should like to take the hon. Gentleman to Mount bay in Penzance, to St. Ives, Bude and Lyme Regis. He laughs, but he has not noticed that those places now have clean beaches where people can go swimming, and the tourist resorts are protected. My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir J. Spicer) and I went to have a look at what was being done in Lyme Regis only a week ago. The hon. Gentleman would never have been able to deliver what we saw. He would have stood there and pointed to the short sea outflow and the filth going into the sea and he would have said, "There is nothing I can do about it, guv. I am afraid that all we can do is to pass an emergency law in the House of Commons to ask you not to flush your lavatories so often, so the filth does not go directly into the sea so often." That is all the Labour party did to deal with the problem when it was in power.

[Mr. Gummer]

The result was not only that we had vast pollution, but that we had a badly maintained water distribution network, drinking water that was not as good as it could be and high rates of leakage. It is about time the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras looked at his figures for leakage. I do not know whether the House realises it, but the hon. Gentleman includes in his leakage figures every time a fire engine uses a hydrant for putting out a fire and every time the system is washed out, as has to be done after maintenance works.

Much leakage takes place, of course, on the customer's side, to some extent, and much more on the companies' side, but the hon. Gentleman does not do his case any good if he does not admit that leakage has been a long tradition in the industry. His party never raised the issue before privatisation. I asked the hon. Gentleman which of the reports of the municipal water companies included anything about leakage. He said that he could not afford to look it up. His research assistant appears to have been very busy, and I understand that he might need another week to do so, but I suggest that he finds out how enthusiastic water companies have been about leakage since 1911. I mention 1911, because that was the famous date when the municipalised water system admitted that it was much better to build a few more reservoirs than to do anything about the leaks.

There is nothing new about leakage, but we need to do something about it now because of the change in climate. It is interesting that the south-east has lower leakage rates. The companies there recognised the need to control leakage because that was where the shortage of water was felt most and extra demand came most sharply. The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras was less than fair about what is being done. I join him in his attacks on some of the lunacies. I agree with him that it is unacceptable that South West Water took water out of the reservoir and put it into the sea. But the hon. Gentleman would have been more believable and he would have got more support if he had been prepared to admit, as *The Times* detailed this morning, that the water companies have made extra efforts to reduce leakage. He would have been more believable if he had accepted the considerable work that is being done before he got on to the particular improvements that he would like to see.

Mr. Fabricant: Does my right hon. Friend agree that—disgraceful though the recent action of South West Water is—at least it is in the public domain because it is a public company and has to make reports according to the Companies Acts? Is it not the case that similar accidents occurred before in the days of nationalisation, but that often the accidents were covered up and never came to light?

Mr. Gummer: My hon. Friend is right to point to the fact that it is a much healthier system to have public companies in the private sector, which have to report and can be seen to report, so that independent regulators can ensure that those reports are accurate. That must be sensible and it would have been better had we had that system before.

The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras is right that we must go on pressing about leakage, and the only issue between us is how best to do that. It would be perfectly possible for someone outside, without detailed knowledge of local circumstances, to set mandatory targets. The only trouble is that it would not work, and I am rather keen on making things work. It would be much more sensible for each water company to propose what it thought that it could do, and for each of them then to go into detail, part by part—there are different areas of different water companies, as we found clearly in Yorkshire—with the regulator, thereby arriving at the maximum and best improvements that could properly and sensibly be made. If the water companies are not prepared to do that, I have the powers to force them to take such action. I have said repeatedly that I shall use those powers.

It will be much more effective to use my existing powers, having argued matters through and pressed a case, so that we get the best response possible, than to come in flat-footed from outside, having said to everyone, "We don't listen to experts." That is what the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras said a week or two ago. He does not listen to experts. No doubt he would know exactly what the right leakage rate is for Sutton, Stretford and even St. Pancras. He would know. He would be able to tell others exactly what they should do. The hon. Gentleman wants mandatory rules that he sets out.

I do not believe that any sane person would consider the hon. Gentleman to have the ability to make such decisions. I do not consider his approach to be a proper way in which to proceed. I have powers and I shall use them. I shall use them, however, having sought to ensure that every effort has been made to use all the opportunities, the expertise and the willingness to meet demands that are available.

Mr. Dobson: If the idea of the Secretary of State setting mandatory targets is so stupid, why were such targets recommended by the National Rivers Authority? Before the right hon. Gentleman continues with inaccurate quotations, let me make it clear that I have never said that I do not listen to experts. I listen to them, but I do not necessarily agree with them.

Mr. Gummer: I do not want to quarrel with the hon. Gentleman. I hope that he will read again what he said. What he said may have been inadvertent. Many of my hon. Friends were present when he made the statement. We heard what he said, and it was repeated by my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Mr. Evans). My hon. Friend gave plenty of space to enable the hon. Gentleman to correct him, and he did not.

Mr. Dobson: The right hon. Gentleman is wrong.

Mr. Gummer: It is all very well the hon. Gentleman saying, "The right hon. Gentleman is wrong," from a sedentary position. That is the basis of his arguments generally. The hon. Gentleman had better look up the record for himself.

Mr. Dobson: I have.

Mr. Gummer: I am happy that the hon. Gentleman was so worried about it that he had to look it up. The House certainly gained the impression that he was not very keen on listening to experts.

As I said, I have mandatory powers and I shall use them. The only thing between us is whether we get a better answer in every area by going water company by

water company and part of water company by part of water company, or whether we splash targets around and hope that things will work out in a reasonable way.

Mr. Burden: First, will the Secretary of State explain clearly the nature of the mandatory powers that he already possesses? Secondly, on what occasion has a Labour Member suggested uniform leakage targets throughout the country? Mandatory targets are entirely different. Thirdly, if the right hon. Gentleman is talking about Members being believable—he presumably wishes his concerns on these matters to be believable—why is it that the Government have not allocated any time for my private Member's Bill, the Water (Conservation and Consumer Choice) Bill, which would allow a proper debate to take place on all those matters and enable all the difficulties to be ironed out? Leakage, abstraction licences, water efficiency in the home and consumer choice on charging could all be discussed. Why is he scared of the Bill even being discussed in the House?

Mr. Gummer: The hon. Gentleman knows that what he has said about his private Member's Bill could be said about any private Member's Bill on an important topic. Time is allocated for private Members' Bills, and the hon. Gentleman has part of that time. I have no doubt that he will use his time as effectively as possible. No Government, including the Labour Government, ever found it possible to provide time for all private Members' Bills or for any private Member's Bill in the circumstances that the hon. Gentleman outlined. The nature of all such Bills is that they are promoted. They relate to many and varied issues and they are considered extremely important by those who promote them. If we provided time for all private Members' Bills, we would not have time to do what the hon. Gentleman would like us to do, such as improving the construction industry by means of the Bill that was presented to the House only yesterday.

If all that the Opposition mean by mandatory targets is that they would work out targets in every area with the water companies, and if the companies did not meet those targets, they would impose them, we do not disagree. That is precisely what the Government are doing. I have the necessary powers to do that and those are the powers that I shall use if the Director General of Water Services fails, with the water companies, to deliver the targets that I think are satisfactory.

There was a serious part in what the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras had to say, which concerned me and will concern many people outside the House. Leakage is the only subject on which he can wax lyrical, and he is right to say that we should reduce leakage as much as possible. It is possible, however, to put leakage at the top of our agenda only because of the investment that has already been made, to raise the standards of drinking water so that they will begin to be as high as those that prevail in the rest of Europe. Investment has been made to clean up our beaches and to ensure that waste water reaches reasonably tolerable standards. Investment has begun so that the infrastructure can be replaced in a way that the great Thames ring main exemplifies.

The improvements that I have outlined could not have been achieved unless we had started with the investment that has come about only because of privatisation. The only thing that the hon. Gentleman can talk about is leakage, even though rates of leakage are those inherited from the long period during which his system of running the water industry prevailed, when he never complained about leakage, and his one-club approach does not command very much confidence outside the House.

I accept that the hon. Gentleman talks about some other issues. He seems not to do so, however, within the context of other Labour spokesmen in any other capital city of Europe. Extreme damage is being done to the Labour party's reputation and I want to help it bring the damage to an end.

If the hon. Gentleman were to talk to members of the Finnish Labour party, they would tell him that they are in favour of water metering because of the need for sustainable development, the requirement to take into account environmental needs and the recognition that it is the proper way to ensure that resources are properly used. Finland is not a country that is known for its hot summers. Neither is it a country where water resources are as tight as in many other countries. As I said, however, the Finnish Labour party would be entirely in favour of water metering for environmental reasons.

The same is true of the hon. Gentleman's German socialist colleagues, as it is of his Belgian, Greek, Italian, Austrian, Portuguese, Danish, French, Swedish and Spanish socialist colleagues. In 75 per cent. or more of those countries, water charges are based on the volume used, and all his socialist colleagues would say, "We need to have some form of water metering if we are to protect the public from the loss of water resources."

The hon. Gentleman could say, "I am in favour of water metering, but I need many protections." The hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Ms Ruddock) would say that she needed protection for the very poorest people. Most of the countries that I cited do not have such protections. The hon. Gentleman might say that we should have more generalised arrangements in some cities. He might want metering entirely in new houses. He might say any or all of those things. That would be reasonable. I believe that because we have been so late in dealing with those matters, we must proceed with care and with great concern, to ensure that our proposals are socially equitable and the like. I also believe, however, that not to accept that it is necessary for the resources to be properly husbanded is to hold a view that is inconsistent with any environmental concern.

The trouble with the hon. Gentleman is that he will not even look across the sea to France. When President Mitterrand, the socialist President, considered these matters, for environmental reasons he deliberately chose to end the flat-rate system that was prevalent in many areas in order to help manage water resources. Obviously, according to Walworth road, if it was not invented here—even if it was invented by a foreign socialist—it cannot be applied here.

The reason why I have taken some trouble to help the hon. Gentleman is simply this. The Labour party is now seen as—well, its politics may be red, but it is brown environmentally. It has not a shred of a reputation in any of the environmental bodies in this country or abroad. I have just returned from a meeting of the Commission on Sustainable Development in the United States, where Britain took the lead in changing the way in which we deal with the pollution of the oceans. Water was a major topic of discussion.

[Mr. Gummer]

I must tell the hon. Gentleman that not only our national environmental groups, but international groups, ask me what I am going to do about the fact that the Labour party—the party that forms the official Opposition—is so deeply opposed to the environment. It does not care about the environment. Its leader has made only one speech about the environment, and that was a copycat speech, featuring things that we had said some time ago. In so far as the hon. Gentleman is known for anything, he is known for being the least environmentally friendly socialist in the least environmentally friendly party in Europe.

The hon. Gentleman may giggle. That is his answer to any serious criticism: all that he does is sink into his beard and giggle. The fact is, however, that this is doing enormous harm to Britain. Matters that are common ground between the parties in other countries—environmental matters on which socialists and conservatives can work together in Germany, Belgium, Greece, Italy, Austria, Portugal, Denmark, France, Sweden and Spain—cannot be dealt with in the same way here, because the Conservative party is in favour of environmentally friendly action and the Labour party would not know it if it saw it. The truth is that the Labour party is deeply opposed to the environment, and deeply brown in all its reactions. It shows no sign of improving a terrible reputation and a very bad history.

Water resources and water supply are a prime area in which sustainable development is a perfectly practicable and applicable principle. We do not need socialist rationing; we do not need standpipes; we do not need people's water supplies to be cut off for 17 hours out of 24 for two months. We do not need that for sustainable development. We need a party that can even conceive of mentioning global warming and climate change when it talks about water—a party that can actually bear to reach for the words "sustainability" and "development", and put them together in a speech on resources of this kind.

What we need in opposition is a party that can for one moment lift itself from its dogma, and begin to see that the privatised system in this country has protected the customer and provided water in a way that was never achieved, and to standards that were never insisted on, when the industry was nationalised. We need a party that realises that, without that system, we have no hope whatever of meeting the demands of sustainable development to which the Government are proud to have signed up.

5.13 pm

Mrs. Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): What an incredible finish that was to the Secretary of State's tirade.

We called the debate so that we could talk sensibly. We are not here to make the usual easy gibes about fat cats, or to gripe about the continual price increases. I have not come here to pillory Yorkshire Water yet again; what interests me is growing public concern that the very delivery of water and sanitation to people's homes is being threatened by company greed on the one hand, and Government inaction and drift on the other. Our argument is that the Government have used the excuse of privatisation to wash their hands—metaphorically—of what must be one of their core duties: the duty to ensure that people have adequate clean water and sanitation.

Last weekend, I listened to many leading Tories trying to come to terms with the humiliation that they had suffered last Thursday. Half of them claimed that they would win the next election on the basis of their well-tried principle of minimal government—taking government out of people's lives. Let us look at what that means for the water industry. Those of us who have been asking Ministers questions about this issue for some years—whether our questions have concerned resources, leakage control, pollution control, investment or top salaries—have lost count of the number of times when the response has been "It is for the company to decide on investment levels", or "It is for the shareholders to decide on the level of top salaries", or "It is for the director general to comment on this, not me".

Each water company is supposed to set its investment priorities on resources, leakage reduction or repairs and renewal. The companies are to be guided by an economic regulator. Consultations take place, and decisions are made, on the basis of a five-year financial cycle and five-year business plan. Those plans are not open to public scrutiny on grounds of commercial confidentiality—spurious grounds, given that each company is a monopoly in itself.

The regulator's guiding principle, which he often states, is "incentive" price regulation, which basically means giving each of those private monopolies an incentive to make excess profits, and to make only the investment that, in their view, is economically reasonable. Whatever the Secretary of State may say, environmental, social and public health factors are subsidiary.

We say that in a highly capitalised industry such as the water and sewerage industry, in which 85 per cent. of the cost is fixed, a five-yearly financial overview by a narrowly focused economic regulator is grossly inadequate. It makes it far too easy to put off the necessary long-term investment for the sake of short-term gain. Yorkshire Water's announcement last week of a £40 million investment in a link between the River Tees and the Kielder reservoir was welcome, but it came 10 years too late.

Contrary to what the Secretary of State says, there was a national water resources board that promoted the link with the Kielder in the mid-1970s because it was thought that Yorkshire would run out of resources by the early 1990s unless such a link was built. The regulator and the advice were there 20 years ago, but the investment was not made. It is being made now, in a crisis management exercise that will not lead to value for money or well-run contracts. Will not rushing £172 million into Yorkshire in six months lead to mistakes and poor planning for the future?

Then there is the case of North West Water. On a recent visit to south-east Asia with the Environment Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) felt quite at home, because around every corner he saw signs saying "North West Water" and personnel from the company whom he knew. He also felt uneasy, however, because he knew that back at home the Longdendale reservoirs were still only half full after last summer, and that those same North West Water pipes were leaking 30 per cent. of all the drinking water that the

company treated at home. So what if North West Water's investment in south-east Asia is more economic than supplying Stockport? Where would that leave my hon. Friend and his constituents? What redress do they have?

Water resource planning must have a national overview and it must be open to public scrutiny. It was disgraceful when the Director General of Ofwat, who has a major part to play in any national overview, said that he was not prepared to be subjected to any public scrutiny at the public hearing in Leeds last month into the difficulties in Yorkshire because he was undertaking his own private, confidential survey.

Sir Donald Thompson (Calder Valley): The hon. Lady has been wonderful in looking after Yorkshire Water. She has played her part valiantly and I agree with her entirely about the Director General of Ofwat hiding himself at that public inquiry. It was a completely inadequate response. She will not be surprised, however, if I say that I think that she has come to entirely the wrong solutions about the privatisation of the water industry. We would be in dire straits without it, but I shall not rehearse the points made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

Mrs. Jackson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Gummer: I want to take the most urgent opportunity to tell the House that it has been drawn to my attention that the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) said:

"I must say that I have never felt compelled to agree with experts . . . Whatever experts say, the current system is unfair".—[*Official Report*, 1 April 1996; Vol. 275, c. 56.]

I am perfectly willing to say that that could clearly be interpreted as him saying merely that, on occasion, he did not think that experts were right. Although I am reasonably rumbustious in debates, I do not think that I have ever tried to mislead people on what has been said. The hon. Lady was very kind to give way.

Mrs. Jackson: I am grateful. Two friendly interventions by Conservative Members have left me almost lost for words. But we should recognise that on resources, leakage and the early-day motion that has been tabled today, there has been cross-party support.

Last year, the Government introduced legislation to establish an integrated body to deal with the environment—the Environment Agency, which we supported. However, they missed a huge opportunity to define and put in place the public national overview of water resources about which Opposition Members are talking today. Last week, the agency issued its first major report, and, indeed, it was on water. It has the right priority, but it has no powers: no powers to co-ordinate with any strength the other regulatory bodies concerned; no powers to insist on any investment in resources; and no powers to insist on preventive pollution control—only the power to prosecute when things go wrong. It has no input on leakage control. Section 6 of the Environment Act 1995 says that the agency's duty is to "consider", where necessary, means of

"conserving, redistributing or otherwise augmenting water resources in England and Wales",

but it has no power to insist that the industry makes the necessary investment. The Government have missed an opportunity to use the Environment Agency to take a clear and proper overview of sustainable water resources. There should be a regulatory body for the entire water industry with which other regulators could work and to which they address their responses.

I should like to look a little closer at leakage. Of all the factors that affect water conservation and resources, the National Rivers Authority, the Environment Agency and all other experts agree that stopping leaks from company pipes is the most cost-effective way in which to meet demand more effectively in future; people out there know that too.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds undertook a survey through Mori two months ago in which it asked people what they thought was the best method of water conservation. Of those surveyed, 69 per cent. put mandatory leakage control at the top of their list and 41 per cent. put as their second best the possibility of grant-aided schemes for water efficiency devices in the home. People know what they want from water conservation and water policy. The Government are, however, refusing to act on those two issues.

What is more, the RSPB received more than 70,000 letters in support of the Water (Conservation and Consumer Choice) Bill, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden) referred. The issue of water is certainly well understood. The difference between now and before privatisation is that although it is still of great interest, it has never been the subject of such great public anger about the way in which it is managed and controlled.

For years, the Government's response to calls for leakage targets has been, "Well, that is the responsibility of each company. Each company will reduce leakage from its pipes to economic levels, and they are best placed to decide those levels." Ofwat has asked only for an annual report of leakage rates, which it publishes, but the companies' voluntary leakage reduction targets have not been published, as—again—they were said to be commercially confidential.

It was only as a result of Labour's campaign last summer that the gross wastage of 830 million gallons of treated drinking water leaking each day from company pipes was exposed. That amount is enough to meet the daily needs of half the population of England and Wales. The figures are amazing and instructive. Only last week was the campaign to publish leakage targets in *Hansard* successful. I was very pleased to see them published on 30 April at column *420*.

We have only gone one quarter of the way to winning the battle that we need to win. Having published the targets, we must ensure that figures on how each company is meeting those targets are also published not only annually but quarterly so that everybody has access to them. I was interested in what the Secretary of State said in his closing remarks. We must ensure that where those targets are set, spending and investment to meet them is met by each company. If that is the pledge that the Secretary of State has given, I welcome that major U-turn, and so will everybody else in the country.

Will the Government go further? The Secretary of State mentioned the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Bill, which received its Second Reading yesterday. Will the Government ensure that they use it to introduce sustainable water conservation measures so that each home in future will be water efficient and installed

[Mrs. Jackson]

with low-level flush toilets, for example, which save up to 10 per cent. of water usage in the home? Will the Secretary of State go further and ensure that such conservation measures are implemented through building regulations and water byelaws? Unless they do that I fear that yet again they will use the debate to pile all the blame on domestic customers and will simply restrict household use by the imposition of metering of more and more properties.

Metering is a poll tax on water. It penalises poor families and brings huge paybacks to the rich. In Britain, there is no flat rate charge. The charge is graduated according to property value, and a person paying top whack property value in the north-west—for example, in the leafy suburbs of Manchester—pays £846 a year. The upper limit of North West Water charges to that person under a metered system, even if that person sprinkles his lawn and fills his swimming pool throughout the summer, is £473 a year. The average bill is £218 a year. Metering would undeniably result in huge paybacks to wealthy people who live in large houses with large gardens. Who will meet the extra cost of that charge of £400 to £600? It will be met by all the other customers at the bottom end.

Metering, which will give such paybacks to the rich, will be bound to put up prices for the majority. In addition, metering is expensive: it puts £25 a year on every bill in overhead charges. Lastly, it is not wanted and is not the way forward for water conservation. Water is too important to be left to market forces and economic regulation. Just as BSE has resulted in chaos in agriculture, in the vital sectors of water and sanitation the Government have no grip. They are happy to deregulate and privatise and to leave the public service interest to the market. By doing so they threaten not just public health, river life and the environment, but the very economy that they purport to support.

It is no wonder that the Water Companies Association called for a national approach in the press release that it issued last week. The supply side of the industry is desperate for a national approach. No wonder the Institute of Plumbing supports the Water (Conservation and Consumer Choice) Bill as a means to bring jobs back to its industry and that the Sewer Renovation Federation is still waiting for the investment upturn that it was promised. No wonder consumers associations and people throughout the country want the Government, or a Government, to adopt a national approach to water that puts customers and the public first. By their absence of leadership the Government have let down the public on this life-giving issue. It is time for them to hand over to others.

5.32 pm

Sir Kenneth Carlisle (Lincoln): I am glad to take part in the debate, which takes place under the umbrella of global warming and climate change. Those are the most significant factors influencing the supply of water, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State mentioned them. We and other countries need to concentrate our efforts in that direction, because a solution in those spheres may solve our water problems.

Last year was frighteningly dry, and the winter rains were insufficient to replenish water levels in the soil or in streams. So far, this year has been even dryer. Those who are in contact with the countryside and with plant growth find terrifying the effect so early in the year of the lack of water. If it continues, the effect on domestic consumers later in the year could be severe. Perhaps we have to accept the dictates of global warming because any solution is long-term, but we must certainly look carefully at how we might mitigate the effects of this year's drought. In doing so, we should judge whether we have a better chance of finding a solution under the current water regime or whether we would have been better off if it were still nationalised.

The evidence shows clearly that privatisation is working. The Secretary of State told the House what happened in 1976—not only was water rationed, but the Government of the day cut all capital expenditure in the industry. The worrying fact about a nationalised water industry is that investment can be turned off at the whim of the Treasury. It is easy to do that because the effect is not apparent in the short term and it saves money. That was what happened when the industry was nationalised; now that its future is in its own hands some £17 billion has been invested. Some £450 million will be invested this year and it is planned that companies will invest twice their annual profits over the next decade. That would have been inconceivable if the industry had remained nationalised.

Investment on that scale has a significant effect on the consumer, but it is somewhat inconsequential to quote such global sums. Perhaps it is more relevant to consider what is happening in our constituencies because that can help us to appreciate the scale of the change. There have been many improvements in Lincoln. Many old water pipes have been replaced. That has improved water quality, which is better without iron deposits. There has been investment in a new pipeline from Nottinghamshire to help to secure supplies, and an extension and improvement of the sewerage system. Those are capital investments, but we have also enjoyed much better and more effective administration.

I have had far fewer complaints from the public since privatisation because, despite what the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Mrs. Jackson) said, the privatised industry has to operate under a strict code of practice. It has targets to meet and it has to perform in certain ways. I have not had the problem of severance of supply to a house for a long time. We are all aware of the trouble that that used to cause but, somehow, Anglian Water has got over the problem and it no longer seems to be an issue.

My one word of advice for Anglian Water is that it should try harder to be a presence in the community. It is an important part of the community and it should have someone who is known there to represent it. Like any other good local firm, it should have a significant personality within the community. Anglian Water is confident that it can maintain supplies this summer. The levels in reservoirs which fell to nearly half empty last year are back to 94 per cent. capacity and Grafham reservoir, which is one of the largest, is full.

I agree with hon. Members who have said that we cannot be complacent about leakage. I am glad, therefore, that Anglian Water has decided to dedicate 65 teams to detect leaks and repair them, and that it plans to reduce the overall leakage level to some 10 per cent. by the year 2000. In the past 12 months, it has renewed 250 miles of mains. Generally, however, we accept that we must live

with some leakage, which is inevitable in an industry of this nature. We just have to work hard to try to reduce it to the minimum.

To a certain extent, I am concerned about increased extraction from groundwater sources by Anglian Water. It is lowering the level of aquifers in the chalk. More work must be done before it taps further into that valuable long-term supply.

All hon. Members think that what people pay for water is important—it has been mentioned on several occasions. Water charges have gone up, but the increase has been largely to meet the dramatic increase in investment, which will help to protect us during dry times. After paying for that investment, we can look forward to more stable charges in the next 10 years and, during that time, our bills are likely to increase by less than 1 per cent. per annum in real terms.

I should like to raise one other issue connected with the water industry: the environment. From my observations, water companies are now far more sensitive to the environment and to the various habitats of which water forms a part. For example, Rutland Water in the Anglia region has developed not only a source of water supply, but a remarkable wildlife reserve.

This debate gives us a chance to re-emphasise the need for water companies to focus properly on the environment. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment rightly mentioned the improvement in the quality of drinking water and rivers, and the cleaning-up of many beaches. I hope that the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) will take up my right hon. Friend's offer of a nationwide tour to witness those improvements.

I am especially glad about the improvement in the quality of our river systems. In 1990, 85 per cent. were judged good or fair; that figure has been raised to 90 per cent. We need to continue that performance. One of the good results of the improvement is the return of otters to our rivers. They require both quality of water and more sensitive management of rivers, so, if the authorities which are concerned with rivers leave more wildlife and curves in the river instead of digging straight channels, the habitat will improve. They have learned that. Some years ago, in our local river in Suffolk, the otter was reintroduced and it is breeding successfully. That has been one of this country's wildlife success stories. Such successes depend on stringent attention to water quality.

I wish the Environment Agency well in its daunting task of continuing that improvement. It is good that it is drawing up statutory water quality objectives in eight pilot regions. Those are targets to aim for to achieve improvement. We asked for such a policy during the passage of the Environment Act 1995 and it is good that it is being introduced. We must, however, be in no doubt about the pressure that drought can put on all river systems. There is drought, and the result is a reduced flow through river systems, so pollution is more likely to happen. That may be one of our challenges during the summer.

Privatisation has led to greater investment, to better management of the industry and hence to much better use of water supplies, which are becoming a scarce resource. It has been better, too, for the consumer and clearly better for the environment. We have not heard yet how the Opposition will improve on that progress. We expect the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras to be much clearer about what he thinks and what his fundamental views are. We have heard many opinions, but without much clear policy. If he is honest with himself, he may recognise that he is big on florid paragraphs, but still thin on policy.

In the end, our water supplies rest on the dictates of a higher authority, and if my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State cannot dance for rain, we must all sit down and pray for it.

5.45 pm

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro): I welcome the opportunity to speak on this subject and the fact that the motion has been put to the House, because there is no doubt that whether a full water supply can be maintained during the coming months, and the environmental impact that the struggle to do so may have, is in many people's minds and needs to be dealt with seriously by hon. Members. Although the Government and water companies seek to assure the public that water supplies will be maintained this summer, the experience of last summer does not do much to put minds at ease. Furthermore, the stresses on the environment are becoming increasingly clear.

Unless there is an immediate heavy rainfall, many parts of the country will again face a serious water shortage, which will manifest itself in widespread restrictions on water usage and put real pressure on the environment as rivers and lakes drain. We have been here before. Two years ago, the Liberal Democrats published figures showing the exceptional water leakage in all the privatised water companies. Last summer, many people throughout the country suffered from a restricted water supply, whether because of hosepipe bans in the south-west or the near cessation of supply in Yorkshire.

Following much stronger warnings issued by the former National Rivers Authority in February, at the start of this month, the Environment Agency found it necessary to warn of restrictions on water use next summer. Water companies on the whole—although not all of them—have been shamefully slow to tackle the problem, and serious doubts must be raised about their ability or will to ensure that water is properly managed as a natural resource, rather than being supplied as a source of profit.

Since privatisation, water prices for domestic customers in England and Wales have risen by an average of 39 per cent. in real terms, yet the water companies claim that they are underfunded and so cannot introduce the necessary measures to tackle leakages. In my constituency and throughout the rest of the region served by South West Water, the price rise has been much higher. Since privatisation, average water bills have risen by more than 100 per cent. in the south-west.

On that point, I noticed that the Secretary of State for the Environment—I commented on this to him directly—claimed that water companies have found £400 million more to invest without having to raise prices. That raises a serious question about where the money came from, given that customers were told that their bills had to rise to sustain the previous investment level. It appears that the water companies now admit to having an extra £400 million to invest, which they previously intended simply to pocket or to pass on to their shareholders—hardly a reassurance that the regulatory system on either prices or water leakages is working. One or the other—if not both—was clearly misjudged.

[Mr. Matthew Taylor]

Our perception is that the problems that are giving rise to hosepipe bans in the south-west are more to do with ineffective management, a lack of effective regulation and ineffective distribution, than genuine water shortages. Yesterday, for example, I spoke to the chairman of the neighbouring Wessex Water. He says that there are no plans for a hosepipe ban, yet it has less water than South West Water, which services fewer people. With the highest bills in the country and on-going water restrictions, South West Water consumers are right to be angry. The same can be said for consumers in Yorkshire, in the north-west and in many other regions.

Given the huge prices rises, and the large profits widely perceived to be paid to water directors and shareholders, the prospect of another summer of hosepipe and sprinkler bans cannot go unaddressed. Equally pressing are the longer-term and further-reaching issues of the impact on our environment, such as the effect on aquifers, including their possible pollution, and the killing of important areas of the natural environment.

I do not suggest that we shall never need a hosepipe or sprinkler ban. In exceptional circumstances, such a ban may be a short-term necessity, but it should be imposed only in the context of a proper plan of supply and an understanding of the emergency measures needed, in terms both of the environment and of consumer needs.

There is clearly an urgent need for a published long-term strategy for the whole United Kingdom, which it would be the water companies' responsibility to ensure was understood by consumers, yet it is equally clear that such a strategy is missing. It is the Government's responsibility to ensure that one is put in place.

The Government have already announced that there will be no standpipes this summer, and the water companies continue to tell us that domestic water supplies will be protected, but 57 drought orders are already in force, and that number is likely to increase during the summer. In fact, the water companies have applied for drought orders in six of the past eight years, so it is hardly coherent to argue that they are used only in exceptional circumstances.

In the south-west, there is considerable doubt about the regional water company's ability to keep water supplies steady this summer. Roadford, one of the biggest reservoirs, is not even 40 per cent. full, which is perhaps not surprising given the fact that the company managed to pour away 1 billion gallons of water into the sea last year.

Apart from the threat to water supplies, any drought would have huge environmental implications. The only time that I agreed with the Secretary of State was when he said that the Labour party had failed to address the environmental issues, and that its motion failed to mention them at all.

As water reserves drop, reliance on abstracting water from rivers increases. That happened last summer, and the signs are that the process will be repeated this year. Rainfall over the past 12 months, including winter rainfall, has been well below average, which has left reservoirs in parts of the north-west, north Wales, Yorkshire and the south-west in a depleted state. Consequently, many water companies are again relying on river abstraction to meet demand.

A recent report from the Environment Agency found that 11 of the 33 rivers it identified had below average rates of flow for the time of year. That was in early April, and the situation is not likely to improve as the summer progresses. Moreover, following last summer's drought, the agency identified a general deterioration in the overall ecology of rivers, so any increased abstraction will cause significant environmental damage.

The overall response has taken the form of ever more pleas to the public to conserve water, but it is unreasonable to expect consumers to take a more active role in water conservation—and it is unlikely that they will—if the water companies do not play a more active role and if, at a time of huge profits, they are not seen to be taking the issue more seriously.

Reducing leakage is of paramount importance, yet there is still no coherent or consistent approach to target setting for leakage control. Two of the remaining nine companies in the Water Services Association—Northumbrian Water and Welsh Water—have yet to set a leakage target, fully six months after the association made a commitment to voluntary targets. That must raise doubts about the effectiveness of voluntary leakage targets, and it should make the Secretary of State pause for thought.

I should like there to be clear targets for reducing water wastage from pipes, and customers to be compensated if they are not met. Setting and monitoring those targets should be the responsibility of the Government in conjunction with the regulators, the Office of Water Services and the Environment Agency. The Environment Agency could take account of the environmental issues, and Ofwat the consumer issues. The Minister should ensure that the targets were acted upon and that the companies understood that, rather than setting the minimum targets that they can get away with to maximise profits for shareholders, they must set the highest standards that can be achieved, to ensure the best service to consumers.

Because Ofwat enforces the water companies' licence conditions, it has the means to ensure that they comply with the targets. Plans for leakage targets should be agreed as part of the licence conditions. Only when water companies and consumers fully understand the need to conserve water shall we make a start towards being able to preserve that resource.

Alongside a strategy for dealing with leaks, companies must develop strategies for encouraging households to avoid wasting water. In August 1994, *Which?* tested the advice from 10 water and sewerage companies in England and Wales, and found their advice on water efficiency wanting. There is little evidence that that has greatly changed.

The Environment Act 1995 gave water companies a new duty to promote efficient use. That duty should be performed, which can best be done through the provision by water companies of grants, advice and information for consumers on installing water-efficient fittings in their homes. There would be a benefit to the companies in so doing, because they would have to invest less in alternative sources of water supply.

Although reducing leakage and introducing water efficiency measures are important, they cannot be seen as a full solution to the problem of water conservation. Besides, it is unlikely that any increased leakage control or water efficiency measures will arrive in time to prevent water restrictions in the coming months.

A national overview for emergency water planning in England and Wales is needed. Regional emergency water resource plans could then be developed for each company, in liaison with the Environment Agency, Ofwat and other interested parties. The plans should identify the main measures to be adopted, depending on the severity of the drought and its location, and they should be subject to a full environmental impact assessment.

It will not do for water companies to believe that they can simply resort to the rivers and natural lakes and destroy the environment to maintain a service which they are already very adequately paid to provide without such extreme measures. However, the companies' belief that they can act in that way is based on evidence, because they seem to be granted the powers to do so quite easily. Such measures should be the last resort, and everything should be done to avoid them.

The plans should obviously involve such issues as a programme of publicity to explain why we need to save water, and a programme of measures to restrict non-essential use of water. In the long term, a more strategic approach to emergency water resource planning is needed.

The Government must develop a national action programme for water resources that deals with the long-term issues, such as leakage control, rising demand for water and increasing pressures on rivers and wetlands from abstraction. The Government's proposals as published in "Water Conservation: Government Action" fail to do that. The fact that the companies are no longer nationalised does not mean that there cannot be a national approach to solving the problems, in conjunction with the regulatory bodies and the companies. That is where I believe the Government have failed.

In consultation with the regulators and non-statutory bodies, the water companies should prepare a review of their water supplies. They should examine how much water is available for use, how much is needed in the long term, and the costs and benefits of the options identified, including support for consumers taking steps to conserve water.

In addition, all available options should be subjected to a strategic environmental impact assessment so that the best environmental option can be chosen—a proposal that I regret to say the Labour party did not make. If the Secretary of State is serious about a sustainable approach to water, I hope that he and the Minister who is to respond to the debate will at least agree that a full environmental impact assessment is vital.

If all those measures are adopted, and the water companies work with their customers to meet water conservation targets, public confidence may yet be restored in the water industry. Drought orders would then need to be used only in genuinely extreme circumstances, rather than almost every year, as they are now.

Water is a necessity for everyone, and the water companies must ensure a guaranteed supply for essential use. Water restrictions and drought orders, in the context of ever increasing prices, are certainly not welcomed by the consumer, and they are good neither for the environment nor for public confidence in the water industry in the form in which it has been privatised and under-regulated by the Government.

5.58 pm

Sir Jim Spicer (West Dorset): I am usually fairly naive, and I had the impression that we were going to have a good debate that would focus the attention of the House and of the general public on the fact that last year was quite dreadful, possibly the worst for a century—

Mrs. Anne Campbell *indicated dissent.*

Sir Jim Spicer: It is no use the hon. Lady shaking her head. We had our worst summer followed by a bad winter with low rainfall. We can see outside today exactly what the countryside, and particularly the south-west, might have to face this summer. We must all pull together and put out the warning orders now to everyone.

Instead of a constructive debate, the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) returned us to old Labour by bashing privatisation. The hon. Gentleman's aim is to attack not just the water companies, but the evils of privatisation. He believes that if we still had nationalised industries we would be much happier and much better off. I will remind Opposition Members of what has happened to some of our major companies since the privatisations of the 1980s which—thank God—are continuing in the 1990s.

British Airways, for example, is a world leader which other countries envy. The House should think back to the state of British Telecom, which was a disaster before it was privatised. It is now an efficient service, with prices 20 per cent. lower than before privatisation. In the electricity industry, prices are down by 9 per cent. and, as we have heard, a further 1 per cent. cut is to be made next year. The gas industry has had problems with its public relations, but prices have gone down by 22 per cent. in real terms. Finally, BP stands head and shoulders above all its competitors in the world. All those companies were a drag on the Government and a disgrace to this country before they were privatised. In every case, customers are receiving better services across the board. Prices are coming down all the time, and everything is far better than it was.

That does not suit old Labour. The Opposition, aided by the media, made a great song and dance about the horrors of the water shortages last year. I am one of the few Members—together with you, Madam Deputy Speaker—who can remember what happened in 1976. We remember the constant attendance at the Dispatch Box of the rainmaker—a very nice man who did his best, but could not disguise from us the awfulness of the situation and the then Government's inability to do anything at all about it. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made full use of the examples of what happened at that time.

In 1976, 50 per cent. of the population suffered a hosepipe ban. That may not be the end of the world, but there were also standpipes everywhere and disconnections were carried out, causing real hardship on a scale that has not been seen since and will not be seen again in this country. We all know that that is true. Last year, we had a longer and drier summer. The House should remember that at this time last year, the temperature was 15 degrees higher than it is now. As a result, the drying out was not just on the surface, but deep down. That created problems very much earlier in the year. However, only 15 per cent. of the population suffered a hosepipe ban last year. All of us, including most of the water companies, have a lot to

[Sir Jim Spicer]

be proud of with regard to last summer. The contrast with 1976, when water was a nationalised industry under a Labour Government, is stark.

Hon. Members have referred to leakages, and I shall refer to my local company. In 1976, Wessex Water's leakages amounted to about 40 per cent. By 1990, the figure had gone down to 29 per cent. and by 1995 it had decreased further to 25 per cent. The target for 2005 is 15 per cent. There may be some people who do not look at the cost-effectiveness of getting below that target and who may say that there should be no leakages at all, but there comes a point when the cost of reducing the amount of leakages by 1 per cent. becomes absolutely exorbitant. Those of us in the south-west—I live in the Wessex Water area, and my bills are more respectable than those of South West Water's customers—do not want to pile on the agony by going for perfection. We want a sensible approach to leakages, and I think that we shall achieve that.

A lot has been said about investment. In the 1970s, the level of investment was appalling, due largely to the savage cuts made particularly in 1977. Wessex Water has stated that only £100 million was invested in its area throughout the 1970s, and the same applies in the South West Water area. As a consequence of the lack of investment, a backlog of schemes was created, and many of those schemes are only now being carried out. In the 1980s, investment rose to £500 million, and in the 1990s Wessex will spend £1.2 billion on water quality, beaches and sewerage improvements.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State mentioned South West Water's scheme in Lyme Regis. That scheme is drawing people from all over the world, but the cost has been enormous given that the population of Lyme Regis is only 3,000 to 4,000. The total amount of investment will be between £15 and £20 million but, as in other parts of the south-west, we had to improve our beaches and sewerage schemes. If we had not carried out those improvements, what a disgrace we would have been. I would like to have taken the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras to Lyme Regis to see a short outflow pipe pumping out raw sewage because of a break in the pipe 50 yd offshore, but it is not there any more. Lyme Regis has clean beaches, and it is once again the pearl of the south-west.

Our consumption of water has increased because of rising living standards and higher expectations, and it has increased by more than 20 per cent. in the past 15 years. I do not agree with those who are opposed to water metering, as there is a case for it. Where else in the world can one turn on the tap and, no matter how much water one uses, one does not pay any more for it? Metering would also provide a check on people with larger gardens who in a dry summer perhaps use water to excess.

In the decade before privatisation, Wessex Water's charges were 4 per cent. above the retail prices index. Since then, the figure has fallen to 2.9 per cent. and I know that it will be reduced further. There are no restrictions in the Wessex Water area for this year, and there will be none. Wessex Water is an efficient company, which has shown other water companies a clean pair of heels.

Since privatisation our water companies are in demand world wide as consultants—something we do not give them credit for very often. People come here because of the quality of our water and the way in which our water companies operate. In Turkey, Africa and wherever major sewerage and water projects are being undertaken, our people are involved. According to the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras, they ought not to be bothered with such projects, but should stay in their little isolated area looking after their own people. They should not bother reaching out to other parts of the world. That applies not just to the water companies, but to BP and British Airways.

I am glad that the water companies are privatised. Since privatisation, they are 10 times more efficient and, above all, the work force is more cohesive, happier and more dedicated than it ever was in the great bumbling empire that we had previously. The Opposition will never understand that.

6.9 pm

Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe (Bradford, South): I shall not speak for too long because I know that other hon. Members wish to contribute to the debate. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Mrs. Jackson), I shall complain about Yorkshire Water, about the Government and about the regulator. In west Yorkshire, all we want is a guarantee that we shall have water. Hon. Members have asked what will happen this summer. At the moment, there is still a drought in west Yorkshire. There are hosepipe bans, people cannot use car washes and there are certain water restrictions.

In years gone by, the authority planned for the future of water by building reservoirs. We were therefore extremely angry last year because the whole of west Yorkshire was threatened. In Bradford, in particular, we were threatened with standpipes and 24-hour rota cuts. There has been great public anger because of the way in which Yorkshire Water has operated as a privatised company. If it is an example of privatisation, the people of west Yorkshire do not want it because they have not received the services that they expected.

We had the ridiculous situation where the chief executive of Yorkshire Water claimed that he had not had a bath for three months and that people ought to conserve water. In August last year the Secretary of State told us to stop whingeing and to enjoy the weather—that is how seriously he took the impact of the drought crisis in west Yorkshire. Yorkshire Water wrote to companies in my constituency and told them to relocate temporarily. There was an enormous effect on our industry and companies could not believe the lack of professionalism of Yorkshire Water.

Today, we have heard that the United Kingdom has the finest quality water in Europe. The quality of the water in Yorkshire is questionable as a result of privatisation. Companies have had to install purification plants because of the lack of attention that Yorkshire Water gives to the quality of the water. Yorkshire Water cannot be blamed for the lack of rainfall and there is the issue of global warming, of which we have heard much today. Should we not have looked at those issues in terms of the investment that was needed at the time of privatisation? The Government gave Yorkshire Water and its assets away to a privatised company at a ridiculous price.

We are heading towards the 21st century and water should be readily available. Last year we had the ridiculous situation where the local fire authority had to

write to Yorkshire Water to say that it was concerned about not being able to meet its requirements in cases of emergency. The health authority was concerned about public health in relation to gastroenteritis and other diseases caused as a result of a lack of water. Yorkshire Water did not consult the community about its concerns. The emergency offices of local authorities begged Yorkshire Water to say what it was going to do. Last year many hon. Members had to come to the House and raise issues relating to water in the Adjournment debate and in questions to Ministers. We should learn from the lessons of Yorkshire Water.

Yorkshire Water is now under new management. Dr. Kevin Bond, from the National Rivers Authority, is now the chief executive and managing director of Yorkshire Water. He has promised that things will be different. He acknowledges that what Yorkshire Water did last year was unforgivable. We hope that he will keep his promises.

We could not understand the role of the regulator in allowing Yorkshire Water to increase its prices by 5.2 per cent.—the maximum increase allowable under the formula that was negotiated. Yorkshire Water increased its prices by 5.2 per cent.; yet it threatened consumers and business users with a lack of water. I hope that the Government will not abdicate their responsibility—as they have in the past—but will look at a national position in relation to water. People in Yorkshire are going through a living nightmare at the moment because of the failures of Yorkshire Water.

We need a sustainable national grid system so that we do not have this difficulty again. We are heading towards the 21st century and it is inconceivable that the Government have not had the foresight to protect our water resources. We have heard about environmental damage. Yorkshire Water kept going by taking water from the River Wharfe, which affected the environmental conditions in that area. The people of Yorkshire were outraged.

The failure of the regulator and the Government to do anything about Yorkshire Water has made people want to see public accountability of water services. We need that accountability in terms of stronger regulations. It is the responsibility of the Government to ensure that people get water—it is a human necessity.

The Government have had to be dragged into the Chamber today to discuss water. The Labour party initiated the debate and has called on the Government to hold an inquiry into Yorkshire Water, to look at what went on and to look at the effects that the water companies have had in other areas. The Labour party always has to ask the Government to do these things. The people of this country know the truth—they know that the Government have been concerned about the dogma of privatisation against public need. We saw what happened in the local elections last Thursday, and the same will happen in the general election. The people will not forgive the Government.

6.15 pm

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Mid–Staffordshire): I thank the hon. Member for Bradford, South (Mr. Sutcliffe) for keeping his comments brief. The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) spoke for 40 minutes, but he said very little.

Ms Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): The Secretary of State spoke for longer.

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Lady says that the Secretary of State spoke for longer, but there was content in his speech and he was saying what he intended to do. The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras criticised and carped, but he said nothing. He does not have the ability to do anything because he is paralysed. No money will be made available to him in the unlikely event of his becoming Secretary of State for the Environment in a future Labour Government. The hon. Gentleman criticised the Government and the water companies. Ofwat has said:

"It is fashionable"—

I have never thought of the hon. Gentleman as being fashionable—

"to criticise the water companies for their performance in last summer's drought, but some did well and overall the companies coped better than the water authorities had in comparable situations in the past"

—that is, when they were nationalised.

The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras demonstrated that he had very little understanding of finance and I understand why he would prefer to see these industries remain nationalised. He confused revenue expenditure with capital expenditure. He asked why they were making such profits and said that they should be put into investment. Clearly, he does not know how to read a balance sheet. Over the next 10 years, the water companies will invest twice their profits in restructuring sewers and sorting out the major problems that we have had for some 50 years in relation to water leakage. Since privatisation, £15 billion has been spent to deal with water leakage and a further £24 billion will be spent over the next decade. That money comes out of profits.

The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras talked about the sweeteners that he claims that the Government gave during privatisation. Even he could come up with a figure of only £1 billion—hardly much compared with the £40 billion to which I have just referred. The Secretary of State challenged the hon. Gentleman and asked him what he would do in the unlikely event of his becoming Secretary of State for the Environment. The Secretary of State asked him whether he would invest in a nationalised water authority, but he had no answer.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Sir K. Carlisle) on referring to climatic changes which have affected the availability of water in the United Kingdom. The hon. Member for Bradford, South pointed to the need for a national water grid, and I believe that he is right. However, I am not sure how it would be delivered. If it were in the form of a north-south tunnel, it would have to be three times the diameter of one of the channel tunnels and the environmental damage would be considerable. Perhaps we should be making greater use of canals and opening them up where they have been filled in. I am well aware of the argument that canals suffer from water evaporation, particularly in hot summers, and I am aware that narrow boats on canals can cause pollution. Nevertheless, canals could provide one answer. If the climatic change that we have suffered over the past few years were to continue, we should have to address that question.

The record since privatisation has been excellent. Some 99.3 per cent. of drinking water samples met the required European Union standard and, more importantly,

[Mr. Fabricant]

100 per cent. of all water sampled was safe to drink. Bathing water has already been mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir J. Spicer). Although I represent the constituency of Mid-Staffordshire, I was born in Sussex and I am conscious of the fact that water conditions, particularly around Peacehaven, were abominable. Southern Water is now spending millions of pounds to make the bathing water safe and the results are impressive. Some 89 per cent. of our beaches now comply with EU standards, compared with only 66 per cent. in the days when water was nationalised. Today, 95 per cent. of its sewerage works meet industry standards, whereas only 87 per cent. did so when water was nationalised.

Severn Trent Water serves many of my constituents in Mid-Staffordshire. More than 70 uprated or new sources of water have been examined since privatisation. Approximately 30 of them are being actively pursued at a cost of about £50 million. Approximately 170 distribution enhancement schemes—costing a further £50 million—are in progress. They are designed to improve pressure and low-flow characteristics in rural areas of my constituency. Approximately 250 additional people are now working on leakage detection and mains repairs. Expenditure on leakage repairs has increased from £15 million to £25 million since privatisation. I also pay tribute to the important work of the South Staffordshire water company, particularly in serving the Lichfield area.

We have heard all about the past—the Minister for standpipes and the Minister for drought under a Labour Government. What was the Labour Government's record? They cut investment in the water industry by one third; they cut investment in sewerage and sewage disposal by one half. They failed to implement the sections of their own Control of Pollution Act 1974 which related to water pollution. They failed to designate any beaches under the terms of the EC bathing water directive, despite the fact that it took effect in 1975.

The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras talked about ownership. Under the Labour Government, the state owned British Airways; it owned shabby cabins and even shabbier stewardesses—outshabbying Aeroflot. British Airways is now a world success. Under the Labour Government's ownership, British Steel made steel that no one wanted. Under the Labour Government's ownership, British Telecom operated old exchanges linked to telephone boxes that never worked. Now, British Airways, British Telecom and British Steel are world beaters that contribute billions of pounds to support health care and education—instead of health care and education being deprived of funds to support the nationalised industries.

The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras would like to see water renationalised; he would like to see taxpayers' money directed away from our schools and hospitals and into water companies. The hon. Gentleman refuses to welcome the fact that the privatised industries pay £60 million a week through taxes, not from, but into, schools and hospitals. The hon. Gentleman has today belittled the £15 billion spent on repairing leaks in Victorian sewers. He has ignored the legacy of under-investment by the nationalised water industry over the past 50 years.

The hon. Gentleman offered no solutions. As we heard today, his colleague the shadow Treasury spokesman offers no money for renationalisation; he offers no money for reinvestment and no money for repairs. All that we have are empty words, a policy vacuum, no solutions, no action and no money—rigor mortis. The Labour Front Bench team are like gorillas in the mist. The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras—the old grey back—is rendered impotent by the bear from Dunfermline.

There is no simple answer to the water shortage, but the Labour party has provided no answers in any of the debates, whether on water, the economy, health or education. The Labour party probably will not have any answers in the debate on the fire service to be held later today. All that the Labour party can offer is the same sad old dogma that has been neutered by the Dunfermline vet. The Government have freed up capital so that more money can be spent on health, education and law and order.

In conclusion, as Ofwat has said:

"Water quality—drinking water and water waste—has improved considerably. This is shown in the improving quality of our rivers. Access to capital markets, backed with adequate financial strength, has enabled us to meet EC standards. The water companies have invested on an unprecedented scale."

There is the answer. But there have been no answers from the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras. Perhaps the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Ms Ruddock) will answer where her leader did not.

6.25 pm

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): I am pleased to have this final few minutes to talk about water. I had not intended to participate in the debate, but I was so outraged by the Secretary of State's vivid use of his imagination in stating what Opposition Members were supposed to have said, that I felt compelled to contribute.

Despite the wonderful picture painted by the hon. Member for Mid–Staffordshire (Mr. Fabricant) of the unprecedented levels of investment, the current leakage rate of some water companies is unacceptably high. North West Water has a leakage rate of 30 per cent.; Yorkshire Water has a leakage rate of 32 per cent. Many of the companies are still not prepared to commit themselves to a target in the near future. It is essential that we have leakage reduction targets, which are set in statute and with which companies are made to comply.

In the few minutes left, I want to talk about the Government's policy on demand management. The Opposition do not believe that universal water metering is the answer. The case was ably made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Mrs. Jackson), who spoke well about the difficulties that that system creates for many families on low incomes.

One of the problems faced by my constituents is that of high water charges. Despite the level of investment by Anglian Water, which has given it a low leakage rate by comparison with other companies, the charges for sewerage services in Cambridge have pushed up water charges to an extremely high level. Many families and pensioners have difficulty in paying their bills. Conservative Members may not have received so many complaints since privatisation, but a continual stream of people who face enormous difficulties in paying their water bills visit my advice surgeries.

Many pensioners believe that they would be better off with meters. For many people who use a small amount of water, water meters may be the answer. The Cambridge water company has offered to fit meters free for pensioners living alone. There has already been an enormous demand for that popular service—several thousand people are on the waiting list.

My constituent, Mr. Reg Dye, has been coming to see me about his water bills since privatisation—even before I became the elected Member of Parliament for Cambridge. He is most concerned: his water bills are exceptionally high because he lives in a flat. Flats are rated at a much higher value than many houses, so Mr. Dye has to pay higher water bills than many people who live in houses just across the road that have more bedrooms than his flat. He took up his case with the Cambridge water company and Ofwat, and asked them what they were going to do about his water bills. It was suggested to him that a meter would be the answer. After a great deal of investigation, it was discovered that, because Mr. Dye shares a header tank with his neighbours, it is simply not possible to fit a meter to his property without enormous expense.

I have a letter from the Cambridge water company to Mr. Dye, which states:

"At the present time, therefore, I regret to inform you that we are unable to install a meter in your flat."

So even if meters become the declared policy and the way in which the Government manage demand, I fear that there will be many people for whom water meters are not only unsuitable but for whom they will be quite impossible to fit.

We must have a sensible alternative policy that does not hit people on low incomes or people who have exceptional demand through no fault of their own and that takes into account the fact that pensioners—who have been so badly hit by the Government—are paying excessive water bills, which are far higher than they can manage.

6.30 pm

Ms Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): In replying, it falls to me to remind hon. Members that this debate has been about the prospects for water this summer. Conservative Members have tried to talk about water quality and cleaner beaches, for which we may all be grateful. But I should remind them that those measures have been derived from European legislation, not from the Government's enthusiasm. My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, South (Mr. Sutcliffe) has, of course, reminded us that there are still concerns about water quality in this country.

The pace of change in our society, the rate of household formation, increased consumption and increased leisure activities are all making dramatic demands on natural resources and the living environment. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Mrs. Jackson) said, such change requires an overview, and it requires a national strategy for sustainable development that is aimed at protecting and enhancing the environment.

The Secretary of State claimed to have such a strategy, yet at every turn it has been undermined by privatisation and deregulation. Nowhere has that undermining been more damaging than in the water industry. Water—that most vital of life resources—under this Government has become merely another commodity, in an industry that is run in the interests of shareholders rather than of the people and the environment.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) said in opening today's debate, massive increases in dividends, executive salaries and customers' bills have fundamentally undermined the concept of community provision, which is crucial to proper resource management. Before privatisation, ordinary people accepted that a public resource might have to be rationed in times of drought. Today, people believe that they are being ripped off by their suppliers, and that, if suppliers set themselves up to make private profits from a natural monopoly, they can expect unfettered demand from customers. Such a state of affairs has very serious consequences not only for this summer but for the long-term future.

We have heard tonight how the Environment Agency's report has shown that this winter's rainfall was well below average, that leakage was up, and that reservoirs have been depleted. Yorkshire Water's reservoir capacity is recorded as 57 per cent., North West Water's as 64 per cent. and South West Water's as 67 per cent. There has also been a limited recharge of aquifers, with the result that a number of ground-fed rivers and aquifers are flowing at levels below average for the time of year. As we have heard, the regions covered by Southern Water and by Anglian Water have been affected.

Many rivers, too, have below average flows, and the Environment Agency has already identified general deterioration in the overall ecology of rivers after last summer's drought. The Council for the Protection of Rural England and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds have expressed concern at the deteriorating environment and its effects on wildlife. Yet increasing abstraction by the water companies has been the predictable response to the forthcoming crisis—and crisis it will be.

The water industry and the Secretary of State have claimed that there will be

"nothing worse than the usual measures".

If that is true, people will of course be relieved to have the threat of standpipes removed. But the "usual measures" are unacceptable when they are the norm. Water companies have applied for drought orders in six out of the past eight years. Such temporary licences and drought orders were designed for real emergencies, not as a means of meeting increased demand. There are already 57 drought orders in operation, and it is obvious that extensions to them will be applied for and that more drought orders will be sought.

It is the water companies' failure to identify the developing shortage and to take action to reduce leaks which has led them to place such a heavy reliance on increasing abstraction, with the consequent pressure on the environment. Virtually all the actions that the water industry will take this summer and autumn are supply-led, and they will all have consequences for the environment.

Severn Trent Water is planning to build a 14 km pipeline, which will carry up to 35 million litres of water per day. North West Water has completed a new pipeline in a record six weeks, and it is building a new 12 km aqueduct. Incredibly, Folkestone and Dover Water Services are now reported to be negotiating to bring up to 2 million litres of water a day through the channel tunnel from France.

[Ms Joan Ruddock]

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, South said, Yorkshire Water best exemplifies the water industry's failure. The Environment Agency accused it of breaking its own rules for operating reservoirs so that it could meet increased demand. Its current plans include expanding its distribution network, transferring water between rivers, transferring water between rivers and reservoirs, and building three more pumping stations. All that is planned, when purified, expensive drinking water is leaking at the rate of 103 million gallons a day. I do not argue that new infrastructure may not be necessary—local people will certainly hope to feel the benefit—but the piecemeal, panic approach described by my hon. Friend the Member for Hillsborough is no substitute for a long-term national and regional water strategy.

This summer's prospects for water are grim. As we have heard repeatedly in this debate, last year the water companies were slow to identify the problem, and slow to take action. As a result, reservoir stocks fell faster than they should have done, and crisis decisions failed to take account of the full environmental impact. That cannot be allowed to continue.

I am very glad that the hon. Member for Lincoln (Sir K. Carlisle) acknowledged that climate change specialists have identified a trend in more extreme and more unpredictable weather conditions—hotter summers and colder winters. Household formation studies predict the need for another 4.4 million homes in the United Kingdom within 20 years. What will be the consequences of such changes for water supply and the environment? Unfettered demand for water will be unsustainable.

Many wildlife sites in the United Kingdom are already threatened by current water resources management. An overview of threats to sites of special scientific interest by English Nature suggests that more than 100 SSSIs could be adversely affected by water abstraction. Another report to English Nature stated that groundwater abstraction probably contributes to changes in plant communities at 26 spring-fed wetland sites in Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire—including several SSSIs for Norfolk and Suffolk, which represent at least 60 per cent. of fens covered by SSSIs.

I shall give one specific example provided by the RSPB. Fowlmere SSSI is one of the few fen habitats left in Cambridgeshire. Several red data birds can be seen on the reserve: bitterns, which are very rare, are regular winter visitors, marsh harriers occasionally visit that SSSI, and bearded tits have bred there. The wetland is fed by underground springs, and the groundwater is also pumped for public water supply. Even though compensation water is now being pumped, it is expected that, with the declining water input, the reed bed will begin to dry out.

That is but one of many examples that we could cite from all over the country if time permitted. There is an immediate need for a national overview and for emergency resource planning, supplemented by regional emergency water resource plans, developed in conjunction with the Environment Agency, Ofwat and other interested parties.

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Lady is right to identify such problems. Is she saying that she has reached an agreement with her hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown)?

Ms Ruddock: The hon. Gentleman makes a ridiculous point, as he did throughout his speech. The Opposition are not arguing that the future Chancellor should provide for investment, but that the water companies that have made huge profits should invest the money they have collected from the consumers.

Water companies cannot be left to muddle their way through summer crisis after summer crisis. Immediate priorities must include a planned programme of publicity, conducted in liaison with the regulator and the voluntary sector, which targets both industrial and domestic consumers with the reasons why water should be saved. Measures must, of course, be taken to restrict non-essential use. Water companies must be obliged to collect environmental data so that full environmental assessments can be submitted with any future drought order applications.

None of that, however, will have any lasting impact unless the Government put in place a national programme that deals with the long-term issues—something that the Secretary of State signally failed to do this afternoon. Those issues are leakage control, rising demand for water and increasing pressure on rivers and wet lands for abstraction.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras said, reducing leakage is of paramount importance. As has been made crystal clear in the debate, Labour rejects compulsory domestic water metering, but we share the aspiration of reducing consumption in the home. Indeed, as we know, water companies have a duty to promote to customers the efficient use of water.

What might those companies do? The private Member's Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden)—Water (Conservation and Consumer Choice)—offers many suggestions. Those companies could give grants for and advice and encouragement to use devices such as low-flush lavatories, gravity-fed showers, spray taps and hot water installation in homes. Those measures contain none of the health risks posed by compulsory metering.

Labour has again expressed its concern today about the attitude of the Environment Agency to further application for drought orders. As my hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras noted, the National Rivers Authority, in its report to the Secretary of State in February, said:

> "Environmentally damaging Drought Permits or Drought Orders will not be supported unless all other options for maintaining essential supplies have been taken."

We ask the Minister to tell us whether that is now the attitude of the Government, and the advice they might give the Environment Agency. We challenge the agency to apply the same judgment as its predecessors.

It is clear from the debate that short-term and long-term solutions are possible, and that the crisis could have been averted, just as any future crisis could be averted. What is even clearer, however, is that, once again, the Government of drift fail to provide the necessary leadership. [*Laughter.*] The Secretary of State may laugh, but his Government of drift fail to provide the leadership

necessary to tackle the problem. Once again, we see a failure to regulate effectively in the interests of the economy and the environment, and a failure to gain the people's trust.

The Secretary of State makes frequent speeches outside the House exhorting people to be more environmentally friendly. I have often heard him speak about the need for people to conserve, re-use and recycle. Yet he, who would chastise an individual for throwing a tin can into a brook, is amazed when people protest at Brent Spar being dumped in the sea. And people will protest.

People are affronted by advice to concrete over their gardens or instructions to turn off their hoses, because it has the stench of hypocrisy. They ask the Secretary of State, "Why should I not water my lawn when my water company allows millions of gallons to leak from its pipes every day?"

The tragedy is that the public become twice-times losers—not only thwarted at home but ultimately risking the loss of precious habitats, landscape and wildlife. In the final analysis, it is the environment that picks up the bill for the water companies' failure to shepherd their resources. Labour in government will implement the plan outlined in detail by my hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras to ensure that that no longer happens.

6.44 pm

The Minister for Construction, Planning and Energy Efficiency (Mr. Robert B. Jones): My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir J. Spicer) said that he had come into the Chamber expecting a good debate, and he implied that he was somewhat disappointed. My hon. Friend was uncharacteristically ill informed, because he obviously did not know that the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) was to open for the Labour party. Had he known that, he would have expected at least the beginning of the debate to get off to a poor start.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Staffordshire (Mr. Fabricant) said, the speech of the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras was a content-free zone. That does not surprise many of us who have listened to rent-a-rant from the hon. Gentleman, on many occasions and on many subjects. The phraseology used is exactly the same, only the subject changes, and certainly no constructive arguments are made. I do not happen to think that that poor start was reflected in the speeches of Back-Bench Labour and Liberal Members, and the speeches of my right hon. and hon. Friends.

I thought it would be interesting to look at the debate that we had on the water industry almost exactly five years ago on 18 June 1991. Speaking from the Back Benches, I said:

"Indeed, I thought that Labour Members had a brass neck to select this subject for debate. As the hon. Member for Southwark and Bermondsey said, their record in office was absolutely deplorable. Not only did Labour Members cut investment significantly then, but they are now proposing to renationalise the water industry, and the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Mrs. Taylor), who speaks on water issues for the Labour party, did not have the decency earlier to give me a straight answer to my question about how that would be funded. We must know how Labour Members would fund investment in the water industry if they would also take a tough line on prices.

It is obvious that Labour gives the water industry a low priority in its plans. That reflects what happened when Labour was last in office."—[*Official Report*, 18 June 1991; Vol. 193, c. 182.]

Nothing changes, and today the Labour party has acted in exactly the same way. It makes promises, but it cannot justify them by reference to where it would get the necessary resources.

A number of themes have run through the debate. The first and most obvious was hon. Members' attempts to place the issue in a national context—what some called a national strategy. The NRA published a national water resources strategy in March 1994, entitled "Water: Nature's Precious Resource". It was founded on the notion of sustainable development, the precautionary principle, and demand management. I should like to refer to each of those principles.

Sustainable development, which was rightly flagged up by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, but not even mentioned by the Opposition spokesman, is the background against which we must view the subject. That was reinforced by the contributions of my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Sir K. Carlisle) and the hon. Member for Truro (Mr. Taylor). Questions must be posed not just about the location of development in the United Kingdom, but about our life styles and the demands we make on all the scarce resources around us. In that regard, water is no different from anything else.

I am not as widely travelled as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, but when I meet politicians from other countries, they make the same point: they cannot understand how the Labour party in the United Kingdom is so far adrift from the policies of all democratic parties in mainland Europe and in the rest of the world. It is a disgrace, and the hon. Gentleman should be ashamed.

The precautionary principle is another key element. The hon. Member for Truro referred to abstractions and drought orders. It is Environment Agency policy to refuse abstractions unless it is demonstrated that leakage is under control. The number of drought orders has fallen quite substantially. I welcome the fact that Yorkshire Water has made it clear that it does not want to resort to a drought order for the River Derwent.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: I requested that there always be environmental impact assessments. There should be pre-planning: the plans should be laid, and the assessments completed.

Mr. Jones: If the hon. Gentleman had allowed me to continue, I had intended to say that, when the inspector inquires into a proposed drought order, the National Rivers Authority's environmental impact assessment is made available to him. That is an important point.

A third key element in the national strategy is demand management. I do not think that it is possible to separate demand management from voluntary metering. The hon. Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell) at least had the decency to accept that it has solved some people's problems and it certainly has an impact on water usage.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Mrs. Jackson) made a similar point in a different context, when she referred to people in posh Manchester suburbs who use unlimited amounts of water in sprinklers, for filling their swimming pools, washing their cars and so on. Some water companies have approached that problem by introducing water metering for that sort of usage. I think that one can make a perfectly reasonable case for

[Mr. Jones]

compulsory metering of that sort of water usage, as opposed to water that is used for ordinary domestic purposes.

Mrs. Anne Campbell *rose—*

Mr. Jones: No—I must continue, or we will lose time for the next debate.

Demand management must be viewed in the context of the comparison that has been made often today between the 1976 drought and recent droughts. One of the main differences is that water consumption was 14,000 megalitres per day in 1976. It has now increased to 17,000 megalitres per day. That means that we are putting more strain on scarce water resources; that point must be considered in the context of demand management.

Hon. Members on both sides of the House referred to leakage, and some hon. Members argued for mandatory targets. I have always agreed with the American slogan: "Waste reduction always pays", or WRAP. It may be a rather extreme application of it in these circumstances, but most water companies should begin to tackle their leakage problems. That is also the view of the Government and of Ofwat. If voluntary targets are not adhered to, the Director General of Ofwat must look at the case for imposing mandatory targets.

I am pleased that some hon. Members, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Dorset, West (Sir J. Spicer), saw fit to praise their local water companies for their many real achievements in that area. The hon. Member for Cambridge mentioned Anglian Water, and I would not want the debate to pass without mentioning my local water company, Three Valleys, which has also done extremely well in that regard.

A number of measures have been introduced to help reduce water wastage. For example, some companies offer free home repair services, and others are likely to follow suit as part of their duties under the Environment Act 1995, which obliges companies to offer free water efficiency advice. I believe that those measures will help.

Yorkshire has had specific water problems, to which the hon. Members for Bradford, South (Mr. Sutcliffe) and for Hillsborough referred. The hon. Lady said, very graciously, that she did not want to bash Yorkshire Water yet again. It is appropriate to rehearse what Yorkshire Water is doing as a result of its past experiences. I too welcome Dr. Kevin Bond's approach, and the humility that he has shown in view of past events.

A programme worth £100 million, which is now virtually complete, involves the installation of a series of new pipelines and pumping stations in north and east Yorkshire that will bring water into west and south Yorkshire for treatment and distribution. In view of the very low rainfall this winter—about 50 per cent. of the long-term average—in the reservoir catchment area serving Kirklees, the company recently announced a further £31 million investment to boost stocks and for additional pipelines to link the reservoirs with existing sources. Completion of the project is expected by August.

As insurance against the possibility of a summer that is even drier than last year's, the company is to start work on a £40 million river transfer scheme—subject to the appropriate application procedures—which will bring water into the region from the River Tees. That is supported by the Kielder reservoir. Yorkshire Water has also commissioned an independent inquiry into water supplies in its area. It has stated that it will consider the inquiry report when it is published, in order to determine how it will influence the company's future water supply plans.

The regulator and the Government have not been inactive, either. In November 1995, the Director General of the Office of Water Services decided to conduct his own inquiry into various aspects of Yorkshire Water's performance of its statutory functions, including those related to water supply. He has powers of enforcement, which may be exercised as appropriate following his investigations. Therefore, the director general believes that it would not be right for him to participate in the inquiry commissioned by Yorkshire Water—which the hon. Lady complained about—while his investigations continue. He expects to announce his conclusions within the next few weeks.

The Government have been monitoring the situation in Yorkshire, as in all other drought-affected areas, since the onset of the drought last summer. Drought order applications have been processed rapidly. We have commissioned independent assessments of Yorkshire Water's applications for emergency drought orders, and we continue to watch developments closely through the Government office for Yorkshire and Humberside.

Mrs. Helen Jackson: I have read the press releases issued by Yorkshire Water and by Ofwat. Does the Minister agree that it was a grave mistake for the director general not to offer some of those points for public scrutiny?

Mr. Jones: It is not for me to say. I have explained how the director general views his role: he feels that his independent inquiry would be compromised if he participated in the other inquiry. That is what I have reported to the House.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln said, we should decide whether it is easier to tackle the drought under the present arrangements or under the former nationalised industry arrangements. To my mind, there is no contest. No money would be available under the old-style arrangements: we have heard the long, sad story about Lord Howell and what he reported to the House. It is extraordinary that a Labour Minister should come to the House seeking legislative power to stop supplying water to customers.

The present situation is much better. We have coped well with the drought. It is a tremendous tribute to those involved that we have survived such a difficult period without the need for standpipes and rota cuts. Of course more can be, and is being, done to tackle leakage, to adopt a more strategic approach and to encourage people to use less water. The Labour party's silence is deafening when it is asked where it would get the money if it approached the problem differently. I am afraid that that is typical of Labour's approach. Its policy is a sham: it has no answers, and no way of providing them in the future.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:

The House divided: Ayes 251, Noes 285.

Division No. 122] **[6.59 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Alton, David
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Ms Janet *(Ros'dale)*
Armstrong, Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Banks, Tony *(Newham NW)*
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beckett, Rt Hon Margaret
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Betts, Clive
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blunkett, David
Boateng, Paul
Bradley, Keith
Bray, Dr Jeremy
Brown, N *(N'c'tle upon Tyne E)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burden, Richard
Byers, Stephen
Cabom, Richard
Callaghan, Jim
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(Fife NE)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Carlile, Alexander *(Montgomery)*
Chidgey, David
Clark, Dr David *(South Shields)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tom *(Monklands W)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Mrs Ann
Coffey, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Covy SE)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John
Cunningham, Roseanna
Dafis, Cynog
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Alistair
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Bryan *(Oldham C'tral)*
Davies, Chris *(L'Boro & S'worth)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham, H'dge H'l)*
Dewar, Donald
Dixon, Don
Dobson, Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eastham, Ken
Etherington, Bill
Evans, John *(St Helens N)*
Faulds, Andrew
Field, Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foulkes, George
Fraser, John
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Garrett, John
George, Bruce
Gerrard, Neil
Gilbert, Rt Hon Dr John
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mildred
Graham, Thomas
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike
Hanson, David
Hardy, Peter
Harman, Ms Harriet
Harvey, Nick
Henderson, Doug
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hoey, Kate
Hogg, Norman *(Cumbernauld)*
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Howarth, Alan *(Strat'rd-on-A)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley North)*
Howells, Dr Kim *(Pontypridd)*
Hoyle, Doug
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Robert *(Aberdeen N)*
Hughes, Roy *(Newport E)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark)*
Hutton, John
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Glenda *(H'stead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Shef'ld, H)*
Jamieson, David
Janner, Greville
Jenkins, Brian *(SE Staff)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn and D'side)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Lynne *(B'ham S O)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd, SW)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keen, Alan
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross,C&S)*
Kennedy, Jane *(L'pool Br'dg'n)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kirkwood, Archy
Lestor, Joan *(Eccles)*
Lewis, Terry
Litherland, Robert
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Stretford)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loyden, Eddie
Lynne, Ms Liz
McAllion, John
McCartney, Ian
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McKelvey, William
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
McMaster, Gordon
McNamara, Kevin
MacShane, Denis
McWilliam, John
Madden, Max
Maddock, Diana
Mandelson, Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester, S)*
Martin, Michael J *(Springburn)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Michael
Meale, Alan
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffield Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Rhodri
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Alfred *(Wy'nshawe)*
Morris, Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mowlam, Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Paul
Oakes, Rt Hon Gordon
O'Brien, Mike *(N W'kshire)*
O'Brien, William *(Normanton)*
Olner, Bill
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Powell, Ray *(Ogmore)*
Prentice, Bridget *(Lew'm E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Quin, Ms Joyce
Radice, Giles
Randall, Stuart
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Dr John
Rendel, David
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruddock, Joan
Salmond, Alex
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shore, Rt Hon Peter
Short, Clare
Simpson, Alan
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Chris *(Isl'ton S & F'sbury)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Spearing, Nigel
Spellar, John
Steel, Rt Hon Sir David
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stott, Roger
Straw, Jack
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Walker, Rt Hon Sir Harold
Wardell, Gareth *(Gower)*
Wareing, Robert N
Watson, Mike
Welsh, Andrew
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Sw'n W)*
Williams, Alan W *(Carmarthen)*
Worthington, Tony
Wray, Jimmy
Wright, Dr Tony
Young, David *(Bolton SE)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Greg Pope and
Mr. Malcolm Chisholm.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(East Surrey)*
Aitken, Rt Hon Jonathan
Alexander, Richard
Alison, Rt Hon Michael *(Selby)*
Allason, Rupert *(Torbay)*
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, James
Arnold, Jacques *(Gravesham)*
Ashby, David
Aspinwall, Jack
Atkins, Rt Hon Robert
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Mole V)*
Baker, Nicholas *(North Dorset)*
Baldry, Tony
Banks, Matthew *(Southport)*
Bates, Michael
Batiste, Spencer
Bellingham, Henry
Bendall, Vivian
Beresford, Sir Paul
Biffen, Rt Hon John
Body, Sir Richard
Bonsor, Sir Nicholas
Booth, Hartley
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Eltham)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Virginia
Bowden, Sir Andrew
Bowis, John

Boyson, Rt Hon Sir Rhodes
Brandreth, Gyles
Brazier, Julian
Bright, Sir Graham
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Brown, M *(Brigg & Cl'thorpes)*
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(South Dorset)*
Budgen, Nicholas
Burns, Simon
Burt, Alistair
Butcher, John
Butler, Peter
Carlisle, John *(Luton North)*
Carlisle, Sir Kenneth *(Lincoln)*
Carrington, Matthew
Carttiss, Michael
Cash, William
Channon, Rt Hon Paul
Chapman, Sir Sydney
Churchill, Mr
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rochford)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Ru'cliff)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coe, Sebastian
Colvin, Michael
Congdon, David
Coombs, Anthony *(Wyre For'st)*
Coombs, Simon *(Swindon)*
Cope, Rt Hon Sir John
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Couchman, James
Cran, James
Currie, Mrs Edwina *(S D'by'ire)*
Curry, David *(Skipton & Ripon)*
Davies, Quentin *(Stamford)*
Davis, David *(Boothferry)*
Day, Stephen
Deva, Nirj Joseph
Devlin, Tim
Dicks, Terry
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Dunn, Bob
Durant, Sir Anthony
Dykes, Hugh
Eggar, Rt Hon Tim
Elletson, Harold
Evans, David *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Evans, Jonathan *(Brecon)*
Evans, Nigel *(Ribble Valley)*
Evans, Roger *(Monmouth)*
Evennett, David
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fenner, Dame Peggy
Field, Barry *(Isle of Wight)*
Forman, Nigel
Forsyth, Rt Hon Michael *(Stirling)*
Forsythe, Clifford *(S Antrim)*
Forth, Eric
Fox, Dr Liam *(Woodspring)*
Fox, Rt Hon Sir Marcus *(Shipley)*
Freeman, Rt Hon Roger
French, Douglas
Fry, Sir Peter
Gale, Roger
Gallie, Phil
Gardiner, Sir George
Garnier, Edward
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Alastair
Goodson-Wickes, Dr Charles
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorst, Sir John
Grant, Sir A *(SW Cambs)*
Greenway, Harry *(Ealing N)*
Greenway, John *(Ryedale)*
Griffiths, Peter *(Portsmouth, N)*
Grylls, Sir Michael
Gummer, Rt Hon John Selwyn
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archibald
Hamilton, Neil *(Tatton)*
Hanley, Rt Hon Jeremy
Hannam, Sir John
Hargreaves, Andrew
Haselhurst, Sir Alan
Hawkins, Nick
Hawksley, Warren
Hayes, Jerry
Heald, Oliver
Heath, Rt Hon Sir Edward
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hendry, Charles
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Higgins, Rt Hon Sir Terence
Hill, James *(Southampton Test)*
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas *(G'tham)*
Horam, John
Hordern, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howell, Rt Hon David *(G'dford)*
Howell, Sir Ralph *(N Norfolk)*
Hughes, Robert G *(Harrow W)*
Hunt, Rt Hon David *(Wirral W)*
Hunt, Sir John *(Ravensbourne)*
Hunter, Andrew
Hurd, Rt Hon Douglas
Jack, Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Jessel, Toby
Johnson Smith, Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Gwilym *(Cardiff N)*
Jones, Robert B *(W Hertfdshr)*
Jopling, Rt Hon Michael
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom
Kirkhope, Timothy
Knapman, Roger
Knight, Mrs Angela *(Erewash)*
Knight, Rt Hon Greg *(Derby N)*
Knight, Dame Jill *(Bir'm E'st'n)*
Knox, Sir David
Kynoch, George *(Kincardine)*
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamont, Rt Hon Norman
Lang, Rt Hon Ian
Lawrence, Sir Ivan
Legg, Barry
Leigh, Edward
Lester, Sir James *(Broxtowe)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Lord, Michael
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maitland, Lady Olga
Malone, Gerald
Mans, Keith
Marland, Paul
Marshall, Sir Michael *(Arundel)*
Martin, David *(Portsmouth S)*
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
Mayhew, Rt Hon Sir Patrick
Mellor, Rt Hon David
Merchant, Piers
Mills, Iain
Mitchell, Andrew *(Gedling)*
Mitchell, Sir David *(NW Hants)*
Monro, Rt Hon Sir Hector
Montgomery, Sir Fergus
Nelson, Anthony
Neubert, Sir Michael
Newton, Rt Hon Tony
Nicholls, Patrick
Nicholson, David *(Taunton)*
Norris, Steve
Onslow, Rt Hon Sir Cranley
Oppenheim, Phillip
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Patnick, Sir Irvine
Patten, Rt Hon John
Pattie, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Pawsey, James
Pickles, Eric
Porter, David *(Waveney)*
Rathbone, Tim
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Renton, Rt Hon Tim
Richards, Rod
Riddick, Graham
Rifkind, Rt Hon Malcolm
Robathan, Andrew
Roberts, Rt Hon Sir Wyn
Robertson, Raymond *(Ab'd'n S)*
Robinson, Mark *(Somerton)*
Ross, William *(E Londonderry)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Mid Kent)*
Rumbold, Rt Hon Dame Angela
Ryder, Rt Hon Richard
Sackville, Tom
Sainsbury, Rt Hon Sir Timothy
Scott, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
Shaw, David *(Dover)*
Shaw, Sir Giles *(Pudsey)*
Shephard, Rt Hon Gillian
Shepherd, Sir Colin *(Hereford)*
Shepherd, Richard *(Aldridge)*
Shersby, Sir Michael
Skeet, Sir Trevor
Soames, Nicholas
Speed, Sir Keith
Spencer, Sir Derek
Spicer, Sir James *(W Dorset)*
Spicer, Sir Michael *(S Worcs)*
Spink, Dr Robert
Sproat, Iain
Squire, Robin *(Hornchurch)*
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stephen, Michael
Stern, Michael
Stewart, Allan
Streeter, Gary
Sumberg, David
Sweeney, Walter
Sykes, John
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy *(Southend, E)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomason, Roy
Thompson, Sir Donald *(C'er V)*
Thompson, Patrick *(Norwich N)*
Townend, John *(Bridlington)*
Townsend, Cyril D *(Bexl'yh'th)*
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Trotter, Neville
Vaughan, Sir Gerard
Viggers, Peter
Waldegrave, Rt Hon William
Walden, George
Walker, Bill *(N Tayside)*
Waller, Gary
Ward, John
Wardle, Charles *(Bexhill)*
Watts, John
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Ray
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Ann
Wiggin, Sir Jerry
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macc'fld)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Timothy Wood and
Mr. Derek Conway.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith pursuant to Standing Order No. 30 (Questions on amendments), and agreed to.*

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the fact that, in the past year of severe drought in many areas, normal water supplies have been maintained with only limited restrictions, in contrast to 1976 when supplies were cut off for large parts of each day for over 1 million people for nearly two months; notes that under public ownership the water authorities did not invest sufficiently in infrastructure, causing pollution of beaches and the sea, high leakage rates, and drinking water of significantly poorer quality than today; notes that since privatisation in 1989 the water companies have invested over £17 billion in greatly improving their operations, efficiency and service to customers; notes the assessment of the Environment Agency that the measures taken so far by the private companies

should be sufficient to maintain supplies in the coming summer, even if it is very dry, with limited further restrictions; notes that those companies have since last autumn put in hand more than £400 million of investment to ensure supplies; and commends the water regulator, the Environment Agency (and its predecessor, the National Rivers Authority), and the Government for the action that they have taken separately and jointly to enable the companies to meet their supply obligations both in the short and the longer term.

Fire Service

7.14 pm

Mr. Jack Straw (Blackburn): I beg to move,

That this House congratulates the Fire Service on its exemplary record as one of the most consistently high-performing services in local government; is appalled by the uncertainty over the future of the world-renowned Fire Service College; and deeply regrets the lack of any clear strategy by Her Majesty's Government properly to sustain and to develop the service.

As our motion spells out, the fire service in Great Britain is

"one of the most consistently high-performing services in local government".

That is a direct quotation from the Audit Commission in its comment on the 1994-95 performance indicators for local government, which were published last month. The British people rely on their fire service. They hope that they will never need it, but when they do require its services, they not only expect that it will turn up as quickly as is humanly possible, but they know that that will be the case.

Like the police and the security services, our firefighters risk their lives to save the lives of others. Earlier this year, three firefighters were killed in the course of their duty in the space of one week. Kevin Lane and Stephen Griffin of the Gwent brigade were killed on duty on 1 February, and Fleur Lombard, of the Avon brigade, lost her life on 4 February. Last year in England and Wales, more than 600 fire personnel sustained injuries in the line of their duties. We pay tribute to them all.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): I am grateful for the mention that the hon. Gentleman made of the two men who lost their lives in Gwent. Is he aware that the fire services in Wales are uniformly extremely worried that the cut in resources will undermine their capability to handle fires and also undermine their safety when they undertake work on behalf of the public? That cannot be allowed to continue.

Mr. Straw: I am indeed aware of the concern in Wales that the hon. Gentleman has expressed, as have a great many of my hon. Friends.

Even when no physical injury has been sustained, firefighters often suffer severe psychological trauma from the horrific events that they witness. That has been the case, for example, for the firefighters who attended the tragic fire in Southampton a few days ago in which four children died.

Many of the firefighters who are killed or injured on duty have dependent partners and children. Proper provision is generally made for dependants, but the death of Kevin Lane in Gwent has raised a grave anomaly. Mr. Lane left a partner and two children. He had been in a settled relationship with his common-law wife, Sian Bailey, for 17 years, but was not legally married to her. Provision has been made for their children and I understand that an ex gratia lump sum payment has been made to Sian Bailey. But she has been refused the regular pension to which she would have been entitled had she been legally married. I believe that that is unjust. At the request of my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith), I have raised the subject in correspondence with Baroness Blatch, the Minister of State, Home Office,

[Mr. Straw]

and I hope that, in the exceptional and unusual circumstances of the case, there will be a positive response.

The British public's faith in their fire service is far from misplaced. As the Audit Commission reported, in 1994-95 an astonishing 95 per cent. of fire calls were met within the specified standard. That response rate was a one percentage point improvement on the previous year, at 94 per cent. No other public service, in local government or outside, can match such consistently high standards of performance or provide such value for money. For the immense peace of mind that the fire service brings, and the incalculable saving of lives, homes, businesses and other property, the service cost the British people just £23 per head last year.

Despite increasing and unwelcome central control from Whitehall, the fire service remains a democratically accountable local government service. It is that which contributes so much to its efficiency. The entire country can recognise the contrast between the intrinsic efficiency of the democratically run fire service and what has happened to that other vital emergency service, the ambulance service, which is now run by unaccountable quangos.

Despite the dedication of ambulance personnel, more than half the urban ambulance services, covering Greater London, all the metropolitan areas, and Avon, Cleveland and Surrey, failed to meet the standard response time of 95 per cent. of emergency calls being met within 14 minutes.

In Greater London, the contrast between the efficiency of the democratically run fire service and the inefficiency of the quango-run ambulance service is stark. Despite the traffic in London, the London fire service met 90 per cent. of calls within the standard response time. In nine out of 10 call-outs, at least one pump, and in many instances two, was at the scene within five minutes. Three pumps were there within eight minutes.

For the London ambulance service, facing the same traffic, 95 per cent. of emergency calls were supposed to be answered within 14 minutes and 50 per cent. within eight minutes. Anyone who knows about the London ambulance service will not be surprised to learn that in place of the 95 per cent. standard for answer within 14 minutes, only 62 per cent. of ambulances arrived on time. In place of the 50 per cent. standard for answer within eight minutes, only 12 per cent. of ambulances turned up on time. What a commentary on the difference between the democratically run fire service and the quango-led ambulance service.

Mr. Anthony Coombs (Wyre Forest): The hon. Gentleman is right to praise the fire service and its response times. In Hereford and Worcester, the service achieves rapid response times and we want to see them maintained. Will the hon. Gentleman therefore condemn the decision made by the democratically elected Hereford and Worcester county council, which is Labour-Liberal controlled, to cut by half the permanent fire cover at the Kidderminster station in my constituency, against the advice of the Fire Brigades Union and not for financial reasons, because more is being spent on the fire service review as a result?

Mr. Straw: I commiserate with the hon. Gentleman because he, like 99 per cent. of his colleagues, has a fire service and fire authority that are not run by Conservatives. I understand his concern about that. I shall not condemn the hon. Gentleman's fire authority because I believe in local democracy. I believe also that issues of the sort that he has raised should be settled locally and not be subject to the centralised control that the Government have sought to exercise over fire authorities and local authorities, including the capping of local authorities.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): It is appropriate to say that over the past few years massive cuts have been engineered and imposed on fire authorities by the Home Secretary and his mate, the Secretary of State for the Environment. Between them, they have introduced cuts in many counties, including Derbyshire, where part-time stations are being closed. We listen to the Home Secretary talking about firefighters doing a wonderful job in docklands and then we see him shed crocodile tears. At the same time, he is closing fire stations. I ask the Home Secretary to meet Derbyshire Labour Members—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Geoffrey Lofthouse): Order. The hon. Member has made a long intervention. I thought that he was intervening in the speech of the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) and not directing remarks to the Home Secretary through me.

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I hope that the Home Secretary will agree to meet a delegation of Labour Members from Derbyshire.

I seldom disagree with my hon. Friend, but in this instance I must pick him up on one important fact. He described the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for the Environment as mates. Their relationship is more that of ferrets in a sack. We have the Europhobe on one side, the Home Secretary, and the Eurofanatic on the other. The idea of the two mating is difficult to comprehend.

In its report on the performance of the fire service, the Audit Commission commented that because of the high level of performance, it was difficult for most brigades to achieve significant year-on-year performance improvements. None the less, performance overall has increased, not decreased. That is despite a significant increase in the demands made upon the service, although its resources in staff and cash have at best remained stable and in some recent years have seen a reduction.

In 1983, the fire services of England, Scotland and Wales received 355,000 calls to fires. By 1994, those calls had increased by over 100,000, to 456,000. All of us who use Britain's motorways know that the fire service not only extinguishes or prevents fires; it has a vital role to play as a rescue/emergency service, attending the scene of countless road, industrial and other accidents when no direct fire risk has arisen.

In 1983, there were 93,000 rescue calls, which are designated special service calls. By 1994, the number had increased by 77,000 to 170,000, an increase of

83 per cent. During the same period we have seen a huge increase in criminal behaviour. I am sorry to say that the fire service has been a victim of that. The number of false alarms—many of them malicious—more than doubled from 220,000 in 1983 to 447,000 in 1994. Overall, the work load of our fire services, measured by calls, increased by two thirds or 65 per cent. in the 11 years from 1983 to 1994. There has been no equivalent increase in the resources made available to them.

In real terms, the amount of spending earmarked by central Government rose between 1984 and 1993-94. Since then, that spending has slowly declined in real terms. In England, it declined from £1,233 million in 1994-95 to £1,200 million last year, and £1,185 million this year. As local authority associations have commented, there was no increase in provision for the fire service in 1995-96, and caps remained screwed down. Capital allocations by the Government—basic credit approvals—have shown an even greater fall. Never large, in Greater Manchester, those allocations have been cut by 40 per cent. since 1992, to less than £2 million. The picture in the west midlands is similar.

The effect of the cuts will be to add to pressure on revenue spending in future years, as old equipment that is expensive to maintain will have to remain in use. The squeeze on spending has been reflected in staffing. The fire services' establishment was 41,745 in 1983, and 41,190 in 1994.

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): Will the hon. Gentleman join me in condemning the Lib-Lab group that controls Essex county council? Despite its standard spending assessment having been increased by £25 million, it has cut the fire service's budget by £1 million. The cut has caused 41 firemen to be put on the job list. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that Labour councils should know better than to do that?

Mr. Straw: I understand the deep trauma that almost all Conservative Members must suffer. As a result of their profound unpopularity and incompetence, they have lost control of almost every local authority in the country. Indeed, there is only one Conservative-controlled fire authority. I shall not condemn individual local authorities. Electors determine the political control of their councils, and electors in Essex—the same has been done by electors throughout the country—have comprehensively turfed Conservative candidates out and in their place elected Labour or Liberal candidates.

Mr. Jerry Hayes (Harlow): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Straw: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman is asking for more. I think that I am right in saying that Harlow was declared a Conservative-free zone only last Thursday.

Mr. Hayes: I have had more farewells than Frank Sinatra. May I say that for a rare moment I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman)? Over the past few days, representatives of the Fire Brigades Union have been telephoning me to complain about the Labour party. They have been complaining because—

Mr. Terry Lewis (Worsley): Sit down, Harpo.

Mr. Hayes: The hon. Gentleman really ought to—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The interventions are becoming too lengthy.

Mr. Hayes *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman knows full well—as do other hon. Members—that interventions should be brief and to the point. I hope that that will happen soon.

Mr. Hayes: All that I would say to the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) is this. The Fire Brigades Union contacted me today, complaining about the fact that the Liberal-Labour pact in Essex had said that it would refuse to speak to any Conservatives. That is wrong. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with that?

Mr. Straw: I can only say to the hon. Gentleman—if he wants to listen to my answer—that, if he asked members of the Fire Brigades Union where they considered the blame lay for the current problems of the fire service, they would overwhelmingly point the finger at the Government, in Essex as in everywhere else.

One key indicator of the pressure on fire services is the fact that nearly 75 per cent. of fire brigades are funded above their standard spending assessment levels. That is done by forcing county councils to save cash in other areas such as education and social services, or through the use of reserves just to maintain an adequate level of cover. But the flexibility that that at least gives county brigades is not available to joint fire authorities in metropolitan areas, or to the new combined fire authorities in areas with unitary local authorities.

Mr. Robert G. Hughes (Harrow, West): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Straw: I want to make some progress, but I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman later.

Against that background, it is little wonder that the president of the Chief and Assistant Chief Fire Officers Association, Mr. Dennis Davis, took the unusual step of writing to all Members of Parliament to express his and his colleagues' concern about the state of the fire service. His letter ended:

"the fire engine arriving at your door may continue to be on time, but that certainly does not mean that all is well".

Part of the complaint of the fire service—from chief officers and authorities, and from the Fire Brigades Union—concerns the level of resources, but that is only part of it. In all events, resources for this public service, as for any other, will be limited, and less than the total demand. Everyone in the service understands that, but what no one can understand is the lack of strategy and leadership on the Government's part, and Ministers' failure to comprehend that it is precisely when resources are tight that there is an even greater premium on good

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management—starting from the top, in the Home Office. What those involved in the fire services regard as unforgivable is the gratuitous harm that Ministers have done, and are doing, to the future of the fire service and its current morale by placing dogma before common sense.

Mr. Hughes: The hon. Gentleman has now spoken for about 18 minutes. He has told us that he considers the fire service's resources to be inadequate. Will he now tell us what resources he thinks would be appropriate—or is he under an injunction from the hon. Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown) to keep very quiet? The hon. Gentleman will have no credibility when he talks of resources unless he can tell us how much extra money he believes should be provided.

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman obviously has not been listening, but I am delighted that he is so confident that we shall form a Government after the next general election. When we do so, he can sit on the Opposition Benches and organise his own debate about our stewardship of the fire service. Meanwhile, today's debate is about his party's stewardship of the current fire service.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Michael Howard): The hon. Gentleman must know that that really will not do. He has been telling the House about a squeeze on spending. If he is complaining about a squeeze on spending, will he now tell the House how much more he thinks should be spent?

Mr. Straw: I shall tell the House how much more I think should be spent only if the Home Secretary can tell me what the Chancellor of the Exchequer's public spending plans will be in the autumn. We are not in government now; the right hon. and learned Gentleman is in government, and the debate is about his stewardship of the fire service.

Mr. Howard *rose—*

Mr. Straw: No, I will not give way to the Home Secretary again. I have given him his answer.

High-quality training is important in almost all jobs. In firefighting, it is critical: the difference between a life lost and a life saved. At the apex of the training system for firefighters in Great Britain has been the Fire Service College, based at Moreton-in-Marsh, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Cirencester and Tewkesbury (Mr. Clifton-Brown). The Home Office annual report describes the college as

"the central training establishment for the UK fire service",

and says that it is

"the most comprehensive facility of its kind in the world."

It has a "world-wide reputation." That is certainly true.

The college, then, is the jewel in the crown of fire training colleges; but what has been the response of Ministers to that jewel? Have they sought to build on its reputation, to raise its status still further, to see it as central to a strategy for reducing the number of fire casualties and fire risks even more? No, they have done none of those things. If these incompetent Ministers spot a jewel in the public service, their only instinct is to try to sell it off and to damage it in the process. That is precisely what is happening to the college.

The Fire Service College was made a next steps agency and forced to operate as a business with its own trading fund all in one go, in 1992. As the hon. Member for Cirencester and Tewkesbury was candid enough to admit in the House on 13 March,

"Unfortunately, the Treasury had eyes on a milch cow that was non-existent and it set it up"—

the college, that is—

"with several severe disadvantages".—[*Official Report*, 13 March 1996; Vol. 273, c. 930.]

The hon. Gentleman went on to list those disadvantages.

The result of that doctrinaire nonsense has been predictable enough. The college has made a huge loss—but it could never be a profitable business, any more than the Joint Services college for our armed services could be turned into a profitable business. As a result of the bizarre financial hurdles that have been placed in the way of the college, however, there is now a serious question mark over its future. Indeed, its chief executive said, when preparing for a meeting with Ministers last November,

"we must emphasise that in our professional judgement, the long term future of the College could be significantly damaged if this situation persists."

The number of students from the United Kingdom fire service has fallen, not because demand has fallen but because local authorities do not have the money to pay for places at the college. As the hon. Member for Cirencester and Tewkesbury said, it would be a tragedy if we let go of such a national asset; but, in our previous debate on the fire service, the Minister who wound up gave no categorical assurance about its future. All that he could lamely say was that Ministers were keen for the college to remain in existence.

What makes such a supine comment all the less forgivable if that, while being so negligent in their management of this national asset, Ministers have continued to praise its work.

"Targets relating to student performance and attainment have been consistently exceeded"

was the accolade given to the college by the annual report. No issue has lowered morale in the whole of the fire service more, or raised more serious doubts about Ministers' commitment to the service, than their handling of the future of the college.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cirencester and Tewkesbury): The hon. Gentleman is being very disingenuous. First, I hope that he will not talk down the future of the Fire Service College, because we want it to go out into the world and secure the maximum amount of business. Secondly, he knows full well that I have been working extremely hard, with the greatest possible co-operation from the Minister of State, Baroness Blatch, and the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, North-East (Mr. Kirkhope). They are giving the matter a good deal of attention, and I believe that they have concrete proposals to restructure the trading fund so that the loss of £2.5 million can be taken into account.

In a letter to me, Lady Blatch wrote:

"You are right to believe that we are at one in our determination to ensure that the college has a secure future."

We want the college to go out into the world and have a good future—and, what is more, we want to encourage all fire authorities to use it or lose it.

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman raised an interesting point in his closing remark—use it or lose it. For many years, there was no question mark over the future of the college. It was used by the fire authorities, and was centrally funded by the Home Office. It took the incompetence and dogma of the present Administration, in 1992, to set it on a financial basis on which it could not possibly make a profit.

Mr. Clifton-Brown *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman. I am now responding to what he said. As for talking down the college, let me remind the hon. Gentleman that on 13 March 1996 he devoted an entire speech to talking down its future because he was so worried about it.

Mr. Clifton-Brown *rose—*

Mr. Straw: This is a short debate. Nothing that has been said today or in the past by Ministers has categorically guaranteed the future of the college. Tonight, we need to hear the Secretary of State—I believe that this is the first time that he has spoken on the fire service—make a clear and categorical statement guaranteeing the future of that college.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: The hon. Gentleman may be misleading the House. The Home Office funds the £2.5 million loss, so there is no loss to the fire college. It is funded by central Government.

Mr. Straw: I was paraphrasing accurately the point that the hon. Gentleman made in the debate on 13 March. He went through various options for funding the college and said that, if they did not work, the college should revert to the Home Office vote. That is exactly the position that we take.

Dogma has driven policy on the Fire Service College and pure dogma lies behind moves by the Government, especially the Deputy Prime Minister, to reduce fire safety by cutting fire regulation. Since the Government's so-called deregulation initiative, all sorts of hares have started running—on foam-filled furniture, children's nightwear and houses of multiple occupation—about which fire regulations might be watered down.

Thankfully, not even those Ministers have been rash enough to implement such change this side of the election. The annual report tells us that the Government's preliminary decisions on deregulation have been referred to the deregulation task force. Perhaps the Secretary of State will tell us when the task force's final conclusions on watering down fire regulations will be announced. I hope that he understands that the interminable process of deregulation, which has been led not by the need to protect the public better against the risk of fire, but by some weird ideology, has been very damaging to those who serve in the fire brigades and those who rely on them.

In February last year, the Audit Commission published a special report on the fire service, "In the Line of Fire". It raised a number of important issues on which I hope we may receive a considered response this evening from Ministers. It suggested that about £67 million could be saved by various changes in working practices and management structures. Coming from a body of the commission's reputation, the recommendations should receive the greatest attention from fire authorities, and are receiving that attention. Sensible improvements in the efficiency of all public services should always merit our support.

Two things need to be said about that £67 million. First, contrary to the impression given by the Secretary of State in the House on 14 March, for example, a saving of £67 million is not achievable in a single year. The report provides no alibi for the Secretary of State's failure to secure a reasonable settlement for the fire service in the last spending round. The Audit Commission has repeatedly made it clear that such savings are bound to take three or four years to come to fruition.

Secondly, changes in structure and working practices are most readily achieved not by hectoring, but by commitment and co-operation, which is scarcely a hallmark of this Administration. The local authority associations have made that point in telling terms. Their fire service expenditure working group said:

"The apparent lack of recognition or value created to justify the scarceness of resources, whilst responding to tighter deadlines and increasingly complex issues is taking its toll on service morale."

The Audit Commission's report was also significant for the warnings that it gave the Government and fire authorities about future liabilities from the fire service pension scheme. Since that scheme is not funded, the commission estimated that so great are the prospective liabilities, fire pensions alone could absorb a quarter of fire service expenditure by 2007. It described that prospect as a "pensions time bomb". That is plainly not sustainable, and I hope that we shall hear about that from the Secretary of State. The annual report said that there would be a consultative document on that scheme and the pensions time bomb. Will the Secretary of State let the House know when we may expect to see that?

The most important section of the Audit Commission's report was that concerned with the upward trend in the number of serious fires and the increase in non-fatal injuries. Paragraph 15 said:

"The high level of public satisfaction with the fire service tends to disguise the fact that the nation has failed to respond as effectively as it could to the challenge of fire."

It said that the challenge in relation to fires and serious fires and the growth in non-fatal but serious injuries "should not be underestimated". The report continued:

"It is possible to reverse such trends, as experience from abroad illustrates . . . there may be benefits in reviewing the national arrangements which circumscribe the operations of the fire service and place emphasis on fighting rather than preventing fires. Compared with some other countries, England and Wales could do better in their overall response to fire."

The Home Office has to some extent recognised the importance of those recommendations, as we can see in the annual report, but just as targets have been adopted with success to cut road deaths and injuries, the time has come for a clear, nationally led strategy to achieve the same results in fire safety.

The fire service is always there when the public need it. We owe the service and those who dedicate their lives to it a great debt of gratitude. In turn, the service needs,

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but has not had from the Government, better recognition and leadership and a clearer strategy for the safety of us all.

7.45 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Michael Howard): I beg to move, to leave out from "House" to the end of the Question and to add instead thereof:

'recognises that fire brigades in the United Kingdom provide an unfailingly effective service to the public, pays tribute to the bravery of fire-fighters, who risk their lives in difficult and often dangerous circumstances, and welcomes the Government's continuing support for the fire service.'.

The danger to the public from fire is devastating. I know that the hearts of everyone in the House go out to the surviving members of the Good family, whose four young children died in a fire in Southampton on Sunday. We look to the fire service to be our front line of defence against the threat from fire. The tragic events of recent months have reminded us yet again of the special risks that firefighters routinely face. We recall the courage of Fleur Lombard, who died fighting a blaze in Avon, and of Steven Griffin and Kevin Lane, retained firefighters who died attempting to rescue a child from a domestic fire in Gwent.

It goes without saying that the Government, like the general public, have a very high regard for the fire service and the professionalism and bravery that we associate almost as a matter of course with the men and women in it. We have seen the fire service at its best in responding magnificently to major disasters such as those at King's Cross and the docklands. Our firefighters do an excellent job of which they can feel justifiably proud.

Of course, the fire service not only fights fires but works to prevent them. Evidence shows that the work of fire brigades, increased public awareness of fire risks through national and local publicity drives and the increasingly widespread use of domestic smoke alarms are succeeding in reducing deaths. Statistics show that from a peak of more than 1,000 a year in the 1970s, the number of people dying in fires had decreased to about 700 in 1994.

Of course, there is no room for an ounce of complacency. The Home Office will continue to ensure that its fire safety publicity initiatives are clearly targeted to achieve maximum impact and effectiveness. We shall build on our relationship with the brigades, as well as forging closer partnerships with those outside the Department, to develop initiatives to take forward the achievements that have already been attained in this important area.

Mr. Chris Mullin (Sunderland, South): In Tyne and Wear, it is precisely fire safety education that is having to be cut as a result of some of the reductions in Government grant.

Mr. Howard: The hon. Gentleman completely overlooks the fact that the fire service is a local authority service. It is funded by local authorities with the benefit of help from central Government. Any local authority that felt that it did not have enough resources properly to fund its fire service was able to appeal for its cap to be lifted. Both last year and this year, authorities that applied for their caps to be lifted were successful. The hon. Gentleman should go back to his party colleagues who run the authority in Tyne and Wear to ask them why, if they thought that they were short of money to fund the fire service in Tyne and Wear, they did not apply for the cap to be lifted.

While we are on funding, I should say that it was utterly disgraceful of the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw), in his mealy-mouthed way, to protest about funding, to suggest that there was a squeeze on it and then completely to refuse to suggest to the slightest extent what he thought a proper level of funding would be. It is not a question of what that funding should be when his party comes to power, although we do not think that it ever will, or in next year's Budget, but of what it should be now, the year about which he is complaining. If he thinks that the Government have not provided enough money to fund the fire service he has a duty to suggest how much should be provided. His failure to do so or to mention resources in the motion demonstrates how utterly pathetic is his approach to this question.

Mr. Skinner: Of course the Government could increase local authority grants. There should be no question of capping, but we all know what would have happened if Derbyshire had asked for the cap to be lifted. The council tax would have gone through the roof and the Home Secretary and his ex-mates on the Treasury Bench would have attacked that Labour-controlled county council for allowing the council tax to reach astronomical heights. Will the Minister answer the question? We have sent him a letter and want to discuss the issue of more Government money for the fire service in Derbyshire. Why will he not answer the letter that was sent by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn)?

Mr. Howard: If the hon. Gentleman will contain himself for a moment or two he will find that my speech deals closely and with relish with the matter of funding the fire service in Derbyshire.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I am sure that my right hon. and learned Friend is aware that Mr. Dennis Davis, president of the Chief and Assistant Chief Fire Officers Association, is also the chief fire officer of Cheshire. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) and I recently met Mr. Davis and had a full, practical and constructive discussion. Does the Minister accept that there is a problem and will he assure me that the Government will continue adequately to fund the fire service, which is a vital national, life-saving service? Will he deal with the severe problem of pensions, which has continued under successive Governments, and will he guarantee the future of the national college? If he agrees to do those things, I shall be happy.

Mr. Howard: I yield almost to no one in my desire to keep my hon. Friend happy, and I can certainly give him the assurance that he seeks that we will continue to fund the fire service properly. As for the details of the funding, if he too will contain himself for a moment he will find that I deal with those in my speech.

If one is looking for an objective assessment of the standing of the fire service, the Audit Commission has provided it. The commission conducted a major study of value for money in the fire service and the findings were published last year. It reported that the fire service could be proud of its record in responding to incidents, that it has high levels of skill and professionalism, that it has able managers and courageous front-line officers and that it is held in great esteem by both the general public and by the individuals who seek its assistance.

Last month, the commission published information showing how individual brigades in England and Wales performed in 1994-95. Commenting on the figures, the commission said:

"The fire service maintained its outstanding performance, meeting national standards for attending fire calls on 95 per cent. of occasions."

Overall, the fire service is in good shape, as the first part of the Opposition's motion seems to recognise.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Does the Home Secretary accept that it is not simply a question of the speed at which the fire service responds to calls, but of the quality of service that it provides when it arrives on the site?

Mr. Howard: Of course I agree, and I am sure that the hon. Lady does not think that the Audit Commission was unaware of that. Its tribute to the efficiency and performance of the fire service, which I have just recounted, deals not simply with the speed of response to calls but with the quality of the service that the fire service provides when it gets to them.

It is true that the fire service is being asked to make efficiency savings: so is virtually every other public service. The trustees of taxpayers' money have a duty to ensure that it is used to best effect—a duty that Conservatives constantly recognise but Opposition Members constantly ignore. The Audit Commission identified significant scope for savings. It concluded:

"There are local opportunities that can be taken now within the current framework. The locally achievable savings identified by this study are £67 million a year. This represents 5 per cent. of the total expenditure on the fire service."

The commission highlighted specific areas in which efficiency savings can be made.

Mr. Straw: The Home Secretary is repeating my point about the Audit Commission's identification of up to £67 million of savings. Does he accept that the commission has made it clear that the savings could not be achieved in a single year, but that it will take three or four years to achieve them?

Mr. Howard: The passage that I read contained the word "now". It stated:

"There are local opportunities that can be taken now within the current framework."

The commission's study set out an extensive agenda for change. It required sustained effort by all involved in the service, including the local authorities as employers, and the Government. We must all respond to the challenge of modernising the service. My noble Friend the Minister of State is active in giving the process momentum. In respect of fire risk assessment and standards of fire cover, we are carrying forward the work in a joint committee of the central fire brigades advisory councils. We are giving precisely that kind of leadership and putting in place exactly the kind of strategy for which the hon. Member for Blackburn called.

The fire service is a local authority service. Statutory responsibility for providing an effective and efficient fire service to meet all normal requirements rests with the local fire authority. The fire service is funded, like other local authority services, through the revenue support grant, national non-domestic rates and the council tax. Local authorities have the opportunity to discuss the question of resources at the Consultative Council on Local Government Finance, which is chaired by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment. He announces the grant allocations for local authority services, including fire, as part of the local government finance settlement.

For 1996-97, Government support for local authorities in England is increased by £966 million.

Mr. Skinner: It is not enough.

Mr. Howard: The hon. Gentleman says that it is not enough. We know that he would spend more and we gather that the hon. Member for Blackburn would also do so, although he did not say how much. I do not know whether he cleared his speech with the shadow Chancellor, although he might have had to clear the motion with him, which is why it contains no reference to funding.

Total standard spending in England for 1996-97 has been set at £44.9 billion, an increase of 3.3 per cent. on 1995-96. It is nonsense to talk of underfunding in such a context. The local government finance settlement is fair and eminently reasonable.

Mr. David Hanson (Delyn): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Howard: No, I should like to proceed on the issue of funding.

For 1996-97, the total fire service element of standard spending assessments in England has been increased by £17 million—by 1.5 per cent., from £1,168 million to £1,185 million. This comprises £14 million for the additional costs of firefighters' pensions and £3 million for training. The criteria for council tax capping that was set by my right hon. Friend allowed an increase in net budget of 2 per cent. for metropolitan fire authorities and 3 per cent. for shire authorities as the norm. But in many cases authorities were permitted an increase above that norm if the result otherwise would have been to prevent them from receiving the full benefit of agreed increases in SSA.

If an authority believed that it could not set a budget for 1996-97 which would allow it to meet its legal obligations, it had the option to set a budget higher than the proposed capping limit and to apply for redetermination of the cap. Some authorities have taken this option. In 1995-96, South Yorkshire fire and civil defence authority sought redetermination and was successful in its application. That precedent was followed this year by Merseyside fire and civil defence authority. Last month my right hon. Friend announced that he had

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redetermined that authority's capping limit to enable it to set a budget at just over £2 million above the level of its provisional cap.

I am pleased to note that firefighters in Merseyside are balloting to call off their long-running industrial dispute with the authority. I am also glad that firefighters in Surrey have called off a ballot for industrial action, but I am concerned that the Fire Brigades Union is in the process of conducting a ballot of its members in Derbyshire and in Essex on the possibility of strikes.

Strikes in the fire service could put lives at risk. I call on all firefighters in Derbyshire and in Essex to consider carefully the possible consequences of their votes in those ballots and, as an alternative to strikes, to pursue their grievances in discussion with the fire authority. I hope that Opposition Members will join me in calling on the Fire Brigades Union to abandon its strike intentions.

Mr. Skinner *rose—*

Mr. Howard: I specifically give way to the hon. Gentleman to ask him to join me now in appealing to the Fire Brigades Union.

Mr. Skinner: The Home Secretary has made it clear that, in Merseyside, people had to take several days of strike action to get the matter before the public and himself. Now that they have carried out the strikes, he has the temerity to say that they have won the argument without strike action, so he is encouraging firefighters throughout Britain to threaten to go on strike, to go on strike, to get the thing on to the agenda and then to get some extra money. He is inciting people to go on strike.

Mr. Howard: I am sorry, although I cannot pretend that I am totally astonished, that the hon. Gentleman has adamantly refused to join in any appeal to the Fire Brigades Union not to call a strike in Derbyshire. I wonder what his constituents and other people in Derbyshire would say if there were to be a fire strike in Derbyshire. I ask him to reconsider his position.

What the hon. Gentleman has said about Merseyside is absolute nonsense from beginning to end. What happened on Merseyside had nothing to do with the Home Office or the Home Secretary. I did not intervene in the resolution of the dispute on Merseyside. It was a local dispute between the Merseyside Fire Brigades Union and the Merseyside authority. I hope that it has been settled, largely on the terms originally proposed by the Merseyside fire and civil defence authority. He should make sure of his facts before he intervenes.

Let me deal with Derbyshire and Essex. As shire county authorities, those councils are in a position to decide the priorities for spending across all their services, bearing in mind their statutory and other responsibilities. It was, therefore, for those councils, in the light of their standard spending assessments and the criteria for council tax capping for all their services, to decide how much to spend on the fire brigade to comply with their legal obligations.

If those councils believed that they could not fulfil those obligations within the proposed capping limits for 1996-97, they had the option to set a budget above that level and to apply to the Secretary of State for the Environment to have the cap redetermined. Neither council chose to do that. If they now consider that they can stay within budget only by reducing the level of fire cover, they must apply for my approval under section 19 of the Fire Services Act 1947. In neither case has the county council so applied.

Nor have those authorities been harshly treated by the standard spending assessment mechanisms. The fire service element of Derbyshire's SSA was increased by £2.7 million in 1996-97. At 15.4 per cent., that was the biggest percentage increase for any fire authority.

Mr. Skinner: Not enough.

Mr. Howard: The hon. Gentleman says, "Not enough." Overall, Derbyshire's SSA increased by £20.5 million for all its services compared with 1995-96 on a like-for-like basis and, under the capping criteria, it was able to set a budget for 1996-97 for all services up to £21.2 million more than in 1995-96.

I understand that, although the authority has asked the fire brigade to make savings, the brigade has not suffered a reduction in its budget compared with last year. Its fire service revenue budget for 1996-97 has been set at £20.3 million. That represents an increase of 3.6 per cent. on £19.6 million, which is the council's latest estimate for revenue spending in 1995-96.

Essex county council's total SSA has increased by £25 million over 1995-96 on a like-for-like basis and, under the capping criteria, it was able to set a budget for 1996-97 up to £28.3 million higher than in 1995-96. The county council has set a budget for the Essex fire brigade of just under £41 million for 1996-97, some £1.2 million less than the budget proposed by the fire brigade. That is nevertheless an increase of just over 3.5 per cent. on the latest estimate of revenue spending for 1995-96, which is £39.6 million.

Of course, it is for Essex county council to decide whether that is sufficient for its fire service, but there can be no doubt that, this year, Essex county council has had a fair overall settlement. There must, therefore, be further discussion between the fire authorities concerned and the Fire Brigades Union before the latter can possibly consider resorting to strike action. In any case, such action can never be justified when the possible consequences for loss of life are so serious. The FBU should call off its ballots and Opposition Members should join me in appealing to it to do so.

One of the problems that the Audit Commission highlighted in its value-for-money study was the growing costs that fire authorities face in meeting the net costs of firefighters' pensions. That is partly historical, as was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton). In common with most schemes in the public service, the firefighters' pension scheme does not have a pension fund. That is a particular problem for the fire service. It has been acknowledged by the inclusion for 1996-97 of a pensions factor in the SSA distribution formula for England. That factor has accounted for 14 per cent. of the total fire SSA. In addition, £14 million was added to the overall total fire SSA.

In the longer term, it may be possible to make the terms of the present scheme less expensive. A review is under way. The findings, when available, will be circulated to fire service interests as a consultation document.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: I shall be brief. Is not the problem over the retirement pension time bomb—the expression used by Mr. Dennis Davis—compounded by the annual pressures on the fire service to save money, and by early retirement because of that and because of injury and illness, which often, sadly, are the result of many years in the fire service?

Mr. Howard: I do not imagine that my hon. Friend is suggesting that the pension problem, which I have acknowledged, should relieve the fire service of the duty to continue to find savings of the sort that the Audit Commission has identified as being available. We need to consider the pensions problem. I have said what we have done so far to deal with it and what we are contemplating doing over the medium to longer term, but we also need to achieve greater efficiency savings and we must deal with both.

Representations have been made about the treatment of individual firefighters under the pension scheme. As I have said, we recall today with enormous gratitude the bravery of the people who have recently given their lives. The firefighters' scheme is among the most generous of all public service schemes, but every pension scheme must draw the line somewhere. Proposals for change can be discussed in the joint pensions committee of the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council, but there are difficulties as well as cost implications for all public service pension schemes in going as far as some would wish.

The only specific criticism contained in the Opposition's motion relates to the Fire Service College. The college was established as the fire service technical college in the 1960s. In the late 1970s, following the closure of the staff college at Dorking, it was renamed the Fire Service College and took on the responsibility of training senior officers alongside all ranks of officer in technical subjects.

In April 1992, in accordance with our next steps initiative, the college became an executive agency on a trading fund basis. The then college management had pressed at the outset for the college to be established as a trading fund. It was expected that, in that way, the college could attract new business from wider markets, in particular from United Kingdom industry and overseas. That in turn would have enabled the college to reduce its prices to UK fire authorities by charging what the market would bear. The college's assets were professionally valued, and a financial framework for its operations was agreed which took account of its business prospects as they were then envisaged. The Fire Service College Trading Fund Order 1992 was laid before the House on 11 February 1992 and approved by resolution on 27 February.

Unfortunately, the business expectations proved too optimistic and the college traded at a loss in both its first and second years. A new joint management team was appointed in May 1994, comprising a new chief executive and a uniformed commandant. The chief executive was given the remit of stabilising the college's financial position.

The new team has had some success in reducing the rate of loss. In the first year the college's deficit was £2.4 million, as opposed to £2.7 million in 1993-94, despite the fact that it faced unexpected additional costs of £800,000 arising from changes in the VAT law on the treatment of vocational training. The college's finances are now under tighter control, the management of the college has been reviewed and a business strategy implemented that separates the business streams.

But the college is still trading at a loss, and I cannot allow that to continue indefinitely. This is why we are now exploring with the Treasury the prospects for financial reconstruction of the trading fund to achieve a better prospect of viability. This is a technical and complex area, but the repayment of the loan for opening assets represents a heavy burden on the business, and it is right to explore possible ways of reducing that burden.

In the meantime I must emphasise that the Home Office has continued to support the college. It made a £2.25 million grant in 1995-96, and there is a similar provision for 1996-97.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I have been listening carefully to what my right hon. and learned Friend is saying about the Fire Service College. I am grateful to him for making the provision that he has made both for last year and for the forthcoming year, which will reassure the management of the college, and above all my constituents who work there. Will he give serious and urgent thought to how the operation can be restructured so that we can come to a positive conclusion as soon as possible, and my constituents can be reassured that their jobs are safe?

Mr. Howard: I can indeed reassure my hon. Friend that we are pursuing that question as a matter of urgency. I pay tribute to the conscientiousness with which my hon. Friend has pursued the subject on behalf of his constituents. He has taken a close interest in it for several years now, and we certainly take seriously all the representations that he makes on the subject.

However, as my hon. Friend said in an earlier intervention, the bottom line is that if the fire service wants the college to continue, as I certainly do, fire authorities must make use of its facilities by sending their staff to take advantage of the training on offer. That training is world class, and it is up to fire authorities to make the most of it.

The hon. Member for Blackburn referred to the scrutiny of the fire service that is taking place, but he did so in terms that serve only to confirm the Labour party's continuing dedication to regulation for regulation's sake. I make no apology whatever for the fact that in this as in all other areas, we are looking to see what scope there is for lightening the burdens that regulations place on business and on private citizens in this country. It would be reprehensible if we could not do that.

Mr. Straw: Is it not even more reprehensible that included in the list for possible deregulation, or relaxation of the fire regulations, were the regulations applying to children's nightwear? Is that not utterly reprehensible? No amount of dogma should override the safety of children.

Mr. Howard: Of course nothing should override the safety of children, but all such matters must be examined

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from time to time, to see whether regulations that were necessary some time ago are still appropriate, and are still the right kind of regulations for today's conditions. Of course we need to consider such matters again. The hon. Gentleman's intervention was absurd. The country will note the dismissive tone in which the Labour party and its spokesman refer to deregulation. As I said before, the Labour party is the party of regulation for regulation's sake. It may no longer wish to be thought of as the party of the red flag, but it remains the party of red tape.

For the past two years the hon. Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown) has been at pains to stress that his party would not spend more. Yet week after week at that Dispatch Box Labour spokesmen carp and complain about alleged underfunding in Government services. Again and again they make promises that would cost the taxpayer more. We have heard that again today.

The hon. Member for Blackburn talked about a squeeze on spending, but he did not say what action he would take to increase spending, or by how much he would increase it. He admits that Labour would abolish capping, so that local authorities would be free to spend at will. I have no doubt that they would do so. The local authority associations have admitted that they would have spent £1 billion more this year if they could have done so.

To date compulsory competitive tendering has saved local authorities about £400 million. Yet new Labour would abolish it to keep its paymasters in the trade unions happy, and that £400 million would be denied to local authorities. The truth is that whatever Labour may say now, if it were ever to get into government it would spend more, less efficiently, and taxes would have to rise as a result.

As the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Sparkbrook (Mr. Hattersley), who knows a bit about the Labour party, said:

"Labour now has a clear choice. It can be either the party of higher taxation and proud of it, or the party of higher taxes which it is ashamed to describe, afraid to admit and incapable of calculating with any accuracy. It cannot be the low taxation party."

I have deliberately drawn attention to some of the achievements of the fire service, as well as responding to the misplaced criticisms of the hon. Member for Blackburn. Those achievements demonstrate the absurdity of the Opposition motion. Rightly, the fire service is widely admired for its excellent performance. There is no foundation whatever for the suggestion that it is being undermined by Government policies. Quite the contrary: our support remains completely solid. I recommend the amendment, and call on the House to reject the Opposition motion.

8.16 pm

Mr. David Clelland (Tyne Bridge): The Home Secretary would have us believe that fire authorities throughout the country are deliberately cutting life-saving services, training, and health and safety when all they have to do is turn to a generous central Government who will provide all the resources necessary to avoid the cuts. Anyone who believes that must believe in the tooth fairy. Why are fire services screaming about the problems that they face if it is as simple as the right hon. and learned Gentleman says to resolve them?

It is an outrage that it has been left to the Labour party to bring the debate to the Floor of the House. On 8 February, I asked the Leader of the House for a debate on our emergency services in Government time, and I drew attention to the Prime Minister's recent praise of firefighters during Prime Minister's questions, when he referred to their "selfless bravery". Tyne and Wear fire authority faces a £2.6 million shortfall in its budget because of Government policy. If that is not an example of hypocrisy—and of saying one thing, yet doing another—I do not know what is. The Leader of the House promised to consider my request, but I am still waiting for a reply. Had it not been for the Opposition, the nation would still be waiting for this debate.

The Government's vicious and unrelenting attacks on our public services have led to a looming crisis in the emergency services, which now affects ambulance services, police resources and the subject of the debate, the fire service. In March, representatives of the fire services in the north came to Parliament to impress on hon. Members the consequences of the shortfall in their 1996-97 budgets. Today, they are here again, in the hope that the Home Secretary will recognise the seriousness of the situation.

Last year, there was a £1.8 million cut in the Tyne and Wear fire authority's budget. At that time, there was outrage in the region. The local morning daily newspaper—*The Journal*—quoted local Members of Parliament who called on the Home Secretary to make sure that there were no further cuts in the budget, and said in an editorial on 13 January 1995:

"If Michael Howard does not wish to find the blood of more innocent fire victims on his hands, he will be advised to do precisely that.

What a pity that he didn't listen to the experts' warnings earlier. It must not take more deaths to bring him to his senses."

Its sister paper, the *Evening Chronicle*, echoed those sentiments in an editorial on the same day. It said:

"The Home Secretary must not impose these cuts on the people of Tyne Wear."

Those comments came after a tragedy in which lives were lost within yards of a previously closed fire station in Whitley Bay.

Did the Home Secretary listen? Perhaps. But if he did, he was not impressed by the views of local people about their local services. A petition opposing the cuts accumulated 8,500 signatures in two weeks and was presented to the Home Office by my hon. Friends the Members for Gateshead, East (Ms Quin) and for Sunderland, North (Mr. Etherington) and me. Again the Home Secretary was not impressed. With the Secretary of State for the Environment, the Home Secretary is to preside over even more draconian cuts this year of some £2.6 million.

What will be the consequences of the cuts? Some 92 front-line firefighter jobs—the very people whose "selfless bravery" was praised by the Prime Minister—will be lost. Dual staffing of control units and foam tenders will mean that appliances will no longer be immediately available when needed. Special support for emergency incidents will be reduced, and two fire appliances will be removed from the operational fleet—a loss of seven life-saving appliances in all.

That is the reward that the Prime Minister thinks appropriate for dedication and "selfless bravery". Only last week, two firefighters were injured in the course of

duty in Washington. During the past few weeks, seven people have been rescued by firefighters from house fires in Gateshead. They were saved by firefighters from two of the stations that will be downgraded as a result of the Government's policies.

When I protested to the Secretary of State for the Environment about the settlement that is causing the cuts, I was told that the Government standard spending assessment—a Mickey Mouse figure that Ministers use to make things appear to be what they are not and which does not take account of special services and the specialist equipment necessary to deal with road traffic accidents, people trapped in lifts and machinery and, as has been mentioned, payments to the pension fund—allowed the authority to operate within the minimum standards.

In the past five years, 550 people have been rescued from property fires in Tyne and Wear. The view of the chief fire officer is that, had the authority operated only the minimum standards—standards on which the Government rely and which have not been reviewed since 1985 or updated since 1955—many of those lives would not have been saved.

In addition, the constant erosion of resources to other fire brigades has meant that the continued existence of the Fire Service College—now a profit-pursuing agency—is under threat. Fire authorities cannot afford to send firefighters there for specialist training, and attendances are down by more than 50 per cent. As a result, specialist life-saving skills will be lost.

Even in-service local training is being cut because there are insufficient staff to cover for colleagues engaged in training. There have been cuts in school visits and visits to youth clubs, at which firefighters try to impress on youngsters the importance of fire safety and the dangers of hoax calls. Tyne and Wear was previously held up as a model to other authorities in this area of work.

The two most important elements in firefighting are speed of response, which is threatened by the Government's adherence to outdated minimum standards, and weight of response, which is threatened by reductions in staffing, equipment and training. The health and safety of other firefighters and of the general public is being put further at risk by this Government, who put a price tag on everything and know the value of nothing.

Britain's firefighters risk their lives every day for the public good. They are there so, if need be, they can rescue us. Today, they are asking us to rescue them. The public will neither forget nor forgive a Government who let them down.

8.24 pm

Lady Olga Maitland (Sutton and Cheam): I welcome the opportunity to praise my local fire service, which is based at St. Dunstan's hill. The fire station is a well-known landmark, and the firefighters are loved by all and appreciated for their bravery, professionalism and enormous skills. All of my constituents know where they are and know that they can be relied upon.

That public confidence is essential to the fire service, and I am worried that Members of Parliament are trying to undermine it, despite the fact that the Government are backing the fire service all the way, as they always have done. There is only one party in this House that is trying to suggest otherwise.

Mr. Alex Carlile (Montgomery): The hon. Lady says that the Government are backing the fire service all the way. Does she agree that, as a matter of justice and humanity, Sian Bailey—the partner for 17 years of one of the firefighters who died in Gwent and who left children—should have exactly the same pension rights as the widow of the other firefighter who died?

Lady Olga Maitland: This debate is about the fire service as a concept, and not about pensions as such. The hon. and learned Gentleman might like me to get on to the issue of marriage, but I shall not do that now.

I have been concerned by the scaremongering by the Labour party, which is suggesting that there have been cuts and crises. Labour has also suggested that resources are such that people are being left unprotected. That is extremely dangerous. Labour is turning the fire service into a political football, and that is downright irresponsible.

The London fire and civil defence authority is Labour-controlled and, my goodness, we all know about it. It has 32 members; 22 are Labour councillors, six are Conservatives, three are Liberals and one is independent. Responsibility therefore lies with those who are running the authority, and it is they who are trying to frighten people witless. It is disgraceful that people are being encouraged to write letters to Members of Parliament, suggesting that the Government are somehow leaving them unprotected. I have received a letter from a constituent in Worcester Park, who says:

"I am personally very concerned to hear about the proposal to reduce the level of public protection in London. Please inform where you stand on this issue as it will influence the way I will vote in the next election."

This is a pro forma letter that has been sent out by activists who are trying to undermine a very valuable service.

The fire service is well supported financially and it is nonsense to suggest anything else. My local fire authority has £27 million in its reserves—a staggering sum. It has no moral right to suggest that it is being undermined. Indeed, the director of finance has said in a paper that the reserves need to be reduced. In January this year, it was forecast that the authority would underspend by £3.7 million. How can that possibly mean that the fire service is being under-supported?

Let us look at the matter in broader terms. Last year, the budget of the London fire and civil defence authority was £254 million, and there was £27 million in reserves. That is absurd, particularly when compared with the west midlands budget of £72 million and reserves of only £2 million. On that basis, the London authority should have reserves of only £8 million. How can the London authority have the audacity to suggest that it is short of money when it is sitting on a golden nest egg?

More than that, the authority has the cheek to overspend on administration—for every £4 that it spends on firemen, it spends £1 on administration. What about jobs for the boys? Members of the London fire authority have run riot and paid themselves handsomely. Their expenses have increased by £43,000 and their overseas travel allowances have increased by £5,800. Tell that to the people in the outside world and they can make their own judgment as to where the money ought to be spent.

We appreciate the fire service and we believe that firefighters should be paid appropriately. People should recognise that the pay of firefighters has increased by

[Lady Olga Maitland]

34 per cent. in real terms since 1979. By contrast, average male earnings have increased by 25 per cent. in real terms over the same period. I believe that we should say thank you to our firefighters, as they have done a magnificent job for us in so many ways.

The professionalism of firefighters has meant that the number of fire deaths is decreasing. In 1993, the number of such deaths fell to 720, the lowest level since 1965. The number of fire deaths in homes fell to 536 in 1993, the lowest since 1962. These are examples of how the education campaigns of the fire service warn and protect people. The campaigns are working.

I welcome the fact that the Audit Commission has complimented the fire service on the fact that it reaches its national call-out attendances on 95 per cent. of occasions, a 1 per cent. increase on the previous year.

I believe that our fire authorities should have efficient managements and that they do not have the right to waste or to hoard. Like every public service, they should be asked to make efficiency savings so that the taxpayer gets the best value for money. That is important. There is no point hon. Members saying, "Spend more money." They should be asking, "Who will pay?" Every responsible Government have to ensure that we get value for money. The Audit Commission has said that there are local opportunities in the current framework to reduce spending. The locally achievable savings identified by its study total £67 million a year. I refer hon. Members to the Audit Commission's paper entitled "In the Line of Fire", which was published last year.

The Audit Commission has said that we should look at the level of sickness leave, which has been at an all-time high. If we looked at the sickness leave intelligently and seriously, we would begin to realise that it could be reduced and that that could save the fire service £17 million a year. We should also examine the amount of leave that is granted in the fire service—there should be more rigour in that direction. The Audit Commission believes that we could make savings of approximately £8 million a year.

Surely it is right and proper to manage all our public services appropriately. We should manage our fire service with the same rigour as we would apply to any other service. We have a firefighting service of which we should be proud. We have upheld and supported it in every possible way. We have increased our support and the pay of firefighters. We admire what they do for us. We should not undermine these magnificent men.

8.35 pm

Mr. Alex Carlile (Montgomery): The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Lady Olga Maitland) has shown, not for the first time, that her obsessions take precedence over reason in what she says in the House. During an intervention that I made in her speech, I asked her to confirm whether she believes that Sian Bailey—who lived with a now deceased firefighter for 17 years and who bore their children—should, in all justice, have the same pension rights as a widow who lived with a firefighter for 17 years. She refuses to answer that question and just utters the word "family". Earlier the hon. Lady said from a sedentary position that she should have married him—and she now nods from a sedentary position confirming that she said that. That is what firefighters and their partners can expect from the Conservative party, as personified on its right wing by the hon. Lady.

The hon. Lady chose to criticise the relatively small sum that firefighters within her region spent on travelling abroad. Does she really believe that British firefighters, with all their expertise, should not make their contribution to the world knowledge of firefighting techniques? Does she really wish to criticise them for taking their expertise and their skills abroad? Again, the hon. Lady nods from a sedentary position—she does wish to criticise them for that. That is another extraordinary proposition from the hon. Lady. The hon. Lady at least recognises that we have a fine firefighting service in this country.

I would like to make three points which, I hope, no hon. Member will question. The first is that we have brave and efficient firefighters in this country, including retained firemen. We have heard that two retained firemen from Gwent recently lost their lives and we send our sympathy to their families, including Sian Bailey, who has already been mentioned.

Retained firefighters do not work only in urban areas; they also work in rural areas, such as mid-Wales where I have my constituency. There we depend almost entirely on retained firefighters. I say to the Minister that reorganisation has led to great uncertainty among the rural retained firefighters of mid-Wales, who see the future of their reorganised service as being very distant from the community that they chose to serve when they were first retained.

Secondly, the fire service commands the support of the public for its efficiency, for its dedication and for the way in which it conducts itself not only at fires but at other terrible events—such as at car accidents and scenes of terrorist bombs, where firefighters are involved in the sometimes horrific mopping up operation.

Thirdly, there are critical financial problems facing the fire service. Despite the bland assurances that we heard from the Home Secretary earlier in the debate, almost no chief fire officer accepts what he says. The Home Secretary and the hon. Lady may tell them that everything in the garden is rosy, but I urge Ministers to ask them for evidence of what is really happening in fire services around this country.

Mr. Dennis Davis, the President of the Chief and Assistant Chief Fire Officers Association and the chief fire officer of Cheshire, has been mentioned. As it happens, I have known him for a number of years and I know that he is not an extremist in any sense. He has a reputation for being a sensible and moderate chief fire officer, and he has served his profession extremely well.

The House should listen to what Mr. Dennis Davis, with all his experience, has said. He said:

> "The fire service is facing a serious financial situation which needs to be remedied if it is not to create major operational difficulties. This is not just a case of special pleading but one where the current financial arrangements help hide a significant problem. It is therefore not a new problem . . . It is however one which is reaching critical condition."

He continues:

> "The UK fire service reputation as a world leader in innovation, practice, equipment, vehicles and thinking, is in serious jeopardy as are those who trade world-wide in our fire related industries."

The House, particularly the Home Office, should take notice when the man selected to represent all chief fire officers in this country is still of the view I have quoted,

despite extensive discussions with the Home Office, despite what we have heard from the Home Secretary, and despite numerous letters in his direction from Home Office Ministers, some of which I have seen.

When I last saw Mr. Davis he made a telling point. He said that such was the financial state of the fire service, not just in Cheshire, but in many parts of the country, that it was having to rely on increasingly old equipment. It is having to cut down on training, which of course affects the Fire Service College—we are talking about an economic issue, not a desire not to use the Fire Service College. Every day, the service faces real-terms cuts in what it is doing. Mr. Davis rolled up his point by saying that the national minimum standards were now becoming the national standards. The national minimum standards were never intended to be the national standards to operate throughout fire services in this country. But, according to chief fire officers, that is what is happening.

We heard a good deal from the Home Secretary about the National Audit Office report. The National Audit Office identified failures by the Government and highlighted two problems in particular. It described the first problem as follows:

"Ineffective national response to the growing problem of fire".

It gave three causes, of which two were:

"Perverse incentives in SSA mechanism"

and

"Lack of a concerted multi-agency effort to tackle the problem."

The second problem that the National Audit Office identified was that the service was facing growing financial problems, and it gave three reasons for that. The first reason was:

"Pervasive and inflexible conditions of service".

The second reason was the

"Burgeoning pensions bill".

The third reason was the

"Inadequate SSA mechanism".

The cause of two of the three problems can be identified, at least in part, as the perverse standard spending assessment mechanism.

The figures show what has happened through that perverse mechanism. The Government may quote the figures and they may demand to know of the Opposition parties how much money is needed to tackle the problem, but criticism of the latter sort comes rich from this Government. The Government have cooked the books of local government finance for so long that the pan has almost caught fire and the fire service may be needed to put it out.

The standard spending assessment for the fire service increased this year by 1.5 per cent.—or £17 million—to £1.185 billion. But one has to set that figure against the fact that pay rose by 3.5 per cent. One also has to bear in mind that pay in the fire service, which is extremely labour intensive, represents about 80 per cent. of budgets and that the evidence is that almost all the other expenditure experienced by the fire services rose in line with inflation.

The result is a widening gap. We do not need an economist, the Home Secretary or the Financial Secretary—all we need is Mr. Micawber to tell us that that position is unacceptable. That point was raised by Mr. Dennis Davis in correspondence—a copy of which I have seen—that passed to the Home Secretary via the hon. Member for City of Chester (Mr. Brandreth), who represents the area in which the Cheshire fire service headquarters are situated. Was there an adequate response? There was no response to what the National Audit Office termed an inadequate standard spending assessment mechanism, with "perverse" incentives.

When the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Bolton, West (Mr. Sackville), replies to the debate I should like to hear how the Government propose to remove the perversity that is affecting the fire service throughout this country. How do the Government propose to make the SSA mechanism adequate to meet the criticism levelled by the National Audit Office?

When the Minister replies I should also like him to deal with the way in which the formula is calculated, particularly in London. There is clear evidence that, in London, the formula used to assess the SSA for the fire service values damage to property higher than damage to people. It is weighted in favour of areas where there are expensively built office blocks, which should be subject to adequate insurance in any event. When it constructs buildings, the private sector is under a duty to ensure that adequate fire precautions are included. It is wrong that people living in densely populated blocks of flats and terraced streets in London should find that the formula is weighted against them and in favour of office blocks along the embankment or in Canary wharf. But evidence to show that that is happening has been produced by the London fire and civil defence authority.

When the Minister replies will he come clean about the pensions problem? The history of public service pensions, particularly as it affects the police and the fire service, is unsatisfactory. But the Government have had stewardship of those important public services for the past 17 years. The Home Secretary reminded us, rightly and responsibly, that we are the trustees of public money. But I remind the Minister, rightly and responsibly, that we are also the trustees of the public service. Why is it that over the past 17 years the public service has been so let down that we all talk—on both sides of the House—about the pensions time bomb facing the fire service? It has become the term of art to describe the problem. The National Audit Office urged the Government to respond quickly. I asked a written question on the subject, and I was assured that the matter was being addressed. Why not answer in this debate? Why do not the Government take the opportunity to explain how fire services are to survive the pensions time bomb and avoid paying 25 per cent. of their revenue in pensions—which plainly cannot be permitted. The Government have had plenty of time to ponder. Perhaps they will now answer.

I urge the Minister to acknowledge that proactive fire safety campaigning needs more money when calculating the standard spending assessment. It is self-evident that such campaigns are cost-effective—they are an investment. One brigade invested approximately £1 million a year in proactive fire safety campaigning. The result was a 70 per cent. reduction in fire injuries and fatalities over four years. That is money well spent. There ought to be a statutory requirement to undertake proactive fire campaigning and more specific funding than acknowledged in the most recent SSA, which for the first time identified PFC as a specific funding area. The Government have no strategy for dealing with investment

[Mr. Alex Carlile]

in years of fire safety campaigning, to influence the attitude of the public to their personal safety and the safety of their premises.

The NAO rightly urged that a partnership solution be found to the problems that it identified and to the difficulties faced by the fire service. That solution involves a partnership of central Government, local government, fire brigades and the civil service, military, police, ambulance service and other agencies that are closely related under the great trust that forms the public service. We see no evidence of the Government making such a partnership work. Fire brigades throughout the country are engaged, as I believe Mr. Dennis Davis would accept, in a damage limitation exercise against Government funding and Treasury decisions that are designed to secure the impossible—the present Government winning the next general election.

I ask the Minister to give a full and honest reply at the end of the debate—particularly to the issues that I have raised.

8.50 pm

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cirencester and Tewkesbury): As the Opposition motion refers to the national Fire Service College at Moreton-in-Marsh in my constituency, it is wholly appropriate that I should devote my speech to the college.

I spoke in the Adjournment debate of the hon. Member for Woolwich (Mr. Austin-Walker) on 13 March, and that speech—which was reported at columns 929 to 931 of *Hansard*—was a purely factual assessment of the problems that currently beset the college. I deplore the way in which the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) quoted selectively from my earlier speech for purely political purposes. I have an important constituency interest in ensuring the college's viability, which is a world renowned training centre of excellence. It maintains the highest possible standards in training UK firemen, whose excellence is recognised throughout the world.

I pay tremendous tribute not only to my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary but to my noble Friend Lady Blatch, who has been unstinting in her efforts to accommodate my discussions and ideas for restructuring the Fire Service College to ensure its viable future. Recently I had a meeting with my noble Friend that lasted no less than one hour. As a result of the Adjournment debate on 13 March, my noble Friend sent me a detailed letter, and she is due to visit the college at the beginning of June. I am hopeful that we shall by then have reached some conclusions as to the way forward.

It is wholly appropriate for this debate to be in the presence of Dennis Davis, president of the Chief and Assistant Chief Fire Officers Association, because he was one of the pioneers of the Fire Service College—so he knows of its excellence and current difficulties. The college is highly efficient. Last year, it increased its non-UK fire business by 10 per cent. It is not a question of the college being inefficient or of problems being of its own making. It is a question of the nature of the independent training fund that was established in 1992. Some of the problems can readily be overcome.

The initial trading fund document that was put before the House when the college was established incorporated a valuation of £31.3 million by an independent firm of chartered surveyors, on the basis of historic cost replacement. The college's current market value is less than £10 million. If the college were required to make a return on that basis, it would be considerably better off. That is one aspect that the Home Office could constructively examine with the Treasury, to see if the basis of the valuation can be altered.

I am tremendously grateful to the Home Office for funding the college's past losses. Although they have not acccrued directly to the college, those losses should be written off so that college's excellent management can start with a clean slate. This morning, I received a letter from Nigel Finlayson, chief executive of the Fire Service College, which will give the House some idea of its current situation:

> "Good progress is being made on the internal re-organisation to improve management of the delivery of the College's programme with a number of key appointments having been, or about to be, made. These include the new Commandant, Mr. Terry Glossop, who takes up post on 1 June."

I pay tribute to the college's previous commandant, Mr. David, and I have no doubt that Mr. Glossop will do an equally good job. Mr. Finlayson also makes clear, as did my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary during the debate, that discussions on the college's financial restructuring are under way. He states that the focus is on issues relating to valuation,

> "which are proving complex and difficult."

I have already outlined a way forward.

The training that the college provides gives rise to two particular problems. One relates to value added tax, which this year has cost the college about £1 million. Following a ruling by Customs and Excise, educational establishments are entitled to register for VAT but are not allowed to charge VAT on their educational courses—the so-called outputs. Equally, such establishments are not allowed to reclaim VAT on the training element of their costs—the so-called inputs. As the college is a training establishment, it is considerably disadvantaged for VAT purposes. I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to examine that problem together with the Treasury and Customs and Excise, because it affects not only the college but all other educational establishments—particularly grant-maintained schools. That arrangement is nonsensical, and the Government would be wise to re-examine the matter.

I intervened on the hon. Member for Blackburn to mention the training provided by the college to other fire authorities. Last year, the college provided 16,000 man days of fire service training. There is a great fear at the college that that figure will decline significantly this year. If that happens, it will affect the college's finances because it will continue to incur all its fixed costs but its income will decline. That would create even greater problems for its bottom line result this year.

I urge all fire authorities to use that excellent facility at Moreton-in-Marsh because they would never be able to set up training establishments to the same standard. As I said in my speech in March, the college has a mock-up motorway on which pile-ups can be staged involving all three emergency services. It has a mock office block and a mock ship in which fires can be staged. It also has one of the best analytical laboratories of any fire training establishment. In short, it has magnificent facilities.

I am concerned to secure an excellent long-term future for that establishment, because not only does it provide employment for 250 of my constituents, but it provides

excellent training, which enables its employees to go out into the world to sell its services. There is a huge unmet need for such training because the only similar training establishment is in America.

If we could restore the college's finances to a sound footing, the management could have a new start and it could have the confidence to go out to its customers in the world and say, "We can provide excellent fire service training. We will get your firefighters up to the same level of training as our own." Those customers would provide the employment that my constituents so desperately need.

It is not a question of finance but one of common sense. I have no doubt that if we can sort out the college's finances so that it can make a clean start, we can then encourage all the United Kingdom's fire authorities to use it. There would then be no danger of Health and Safety Executive prosecutions because firefighters had not been properly trained.

The college is world renowned. It has a bright future. On behalf of my constituents I shall continue to have discussions with Baroness Blatch and I am absolutely certain that, between us, we shall be able to provide a secure future for the fire college in my constituency.

9 pm

Mr. Brian Jenkins (South–East Staffordshire): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for enabling me to make my maiden speech as the Member for South-East Staffordshire. I am happy to be here to speak in support of my hon. Friend the shadow Home Secretary, who moved the motion on the future of the fire service. I hope that the hon. Member for Cirencester and Tewkesbury (Mr. Clifton-Brown) will forgive me if I do not follow his speech in detail.

As is the tradition of the House, I would like to take a few moments to speak about my constituency before progressing to the main issues of the debate. South-East Staffordshire is the very heart of England—middle England personified. I consider it to be a great honour to serve a community in which I have lived for more than 40 years, and in which I have a great number of friends.

I am following in some very distinguished footsteps. My predecessor was a man of great stature, who served South-East Staffordshire since its inception. He was a man who battled for his cause, and was aptly described as a Tory warrior. I knew Sir David and Lady Ann Lightbown socially and politically for many years. His sudden and untimely death saddened all who knew him.

Our last Labour Member of Parliament, my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mr. Grocott), has been a close friend of mine for more than 25 years, and is fondly remembered for his good work in the constituency.

Thomas Guy represented Tamworth from 1695 to 1708. He built Tamworth town hall and the almshouses before he came to London and built Guy's hospital. When he left Tamworth, having been defeated, he put a covenant on his almshouses to ensure that no Tamworth resident who could have voted for him, but who took part in his defeat, would ever be allowed in them. I will not say of which political persuasion he was.

Far and away my most famous predecessor was Sir Robert Peel, who served as the Member for Tamworth from 1830 to 1850. He was a distinguished 19th-century Prime Minister of Great Britain, and twice served in that office. He was famed not only for the Tamworth manifesto and for laying the foundation of the police force, but for forming the modern Conservative party. If Sir Robert and Thomas Guy were starting out in politics as young men today, I sometimes wonder which party they would consider joining. Dare I say it, as progressive thinking people, it would be new Labour.

My constituency has a great claim to fame. In the 9th century, King Offa ruled Mercia from Tamworth. He was the effective ruler of England, and his coinage, minted in Tamworth, proclaimed it. His only equal was Charlemagne, ruler of what is now France. They both called themselves emperor, and their currencies were exchanged in each other's kingdoms. That may have been the first European single currency since the fall of the Roman empire.

King Offa is also known for his great fortified ditch between England and Wales—Offa's Dyke. Some people believe it was dug to keep the Welsh out, but let me put the case of today's historians. Offa, like all major rulers, had a civil service and entourage in his kingdom, and he had to raise taxation. The people living close to the border could avoid his tax collectors by slipping over the border. That was a mediaeval tax loophole, and he had to close it by building a big ditch to stop people crossing over. So Offa's Dyke was built not to keep the Welsh out, but to keep the English in.

The main town in my constituency is Tamworth, and the town centre is dominated by the Norman castle. In days gone by, when rulers set taxes that were too high, the local citizens would storm the castle gates. Today the citizens have a different remedy: they use the ballot box. However, in the past 16 years, we have sometimes felt that a return to the old method would be justified.

I must admit that the ballot box served me and my party well on 11 April. The 22 per cent. swing to Labour was the second highest since the second world war. The majority of more than 13,000 sent an unmistakable message from the people whom I represent: it is time for the Government to go.

The present-day constituency is dominated by the growing town of Tamworth. The population has tripled since the war, and its economic activities have developed from mining and clay products through to light industry and distribution. It has a progressive and highly skilled work force. It has new, large housing estates, inhabited by people who have moved there from all over the country with aspirations of a better life.

The constituency has attracted as much inward investment as the rest of Staffordshire put together, and unemployment has fallen by 18 per cent. in the past year. Our leisure facilities are second to none: they include the only indoor ski slope in Europe with real snow. A Labour council has presided over much of that development, and it enjoys the confidence of the people. With 27 Labour members and no Tories, it is a Tory-free zone. I have every right to feel proud to serve my constituency as a Labour Member of Parliament.

In the 13th century, the Danes laid seige to Tamworth and razed it to the ground: that is where the fire service comes in. Unfortunately, we did not have an effective fire service, and the town suffered badly as a result. The future of the fire service is of real concern to my constituents.

[Mr. Brian Jenkins]

I commend the sterling work of the Staffordshire fire brigade. It has saved countless lives, but the invaluable service it provides is being squeezed by the Government.

While the number of call-outs has increased by more than 50 per cent. in 10 years, central Government funding has been cut. In 1995-96, the Staffordshire fire service lost more than £1 million in real terms, and 36 firefighters lost their jobs as a result. The Government squeeze on Staffordshire's fire service is endangering my constituents.

The potential work load in Tamworth has increased by 300 per cent., but the brigade's strength has increased by only 1 per cent. The town's continuing development makes it difficult for the service to meet its obligations on time. A new station is needed, but it would cost almost £2 million. That is not affordable, with a 37 per cent. reduction in the current capital budget.

The formula by which Government funding is calculated is arcane. The recent change to include a coastal allowance costs Staffordshire £800,000—hon. Members may be aware that Staffordshire does not have a coastline. However, there is no provision for earthquakes, and we have them. The difference between the standard spending assessment and the cost of providing the service is £1.5 million, and that sum is made up from the budgets of other services. There will come a time when it is no longer possible to do that, and the people of Staffordshire are beginning to believe that we pay more but get less from the Government.

My most famous predecessor must be Sir Robert Peel, who served this country well. I do not expect in my political career to emulate his achievement in becoming Prime Minister twice, or his many other achievements for the country. However, in his Tamworth manifesto, he said:

"Declarations of principle will ultimately and significantly fail if they are not adhered to."

I have every intention of living up to that principle, and the people have every right to expect me to do so. In fact, they have every right to expect it of all politicians.

9.9 pm

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): As someone who went to canvass in Tamworth against the hon. Member for South–East Staffordshire (Mr. Jenkins), and despite the fact that I would rather the winner had been of a different political persuasion, I must congratulate him most heartily on his amusing speech. If he can keep it up, it will bring him that great accolade of people coming into the Chamber to listen to him when they see his name on the monitor. If he continues to be so amusing, his reputation will undoubtedly rise, at least during the time that he is lucky enough to retain his seat.

I was particularly fascinated by the hon. Gentleman's description of the real purpose of Offa's Dyke. He told us plainly that it had to be built to keep in people whose taxes were in danger of being raised. I hope that he makes that message clear to the Labour party national executive, because the British people are unaware of the taxes threatened by the Labour party should it ever form a Government. I suspect that that is why Labour Members do not mention that fact. We may well see a mass exit from our country if that disastrous event should occur. That being said, I welcome the hon. Member for South–East Staffordshire to the House.

I am concerned at the actions of the fire service and the way in which it has recently been petitioning us. It must be fully aware, as I know the hon. Member for South–East Staffordshire will be, that the allocation of funds for the fire service is the responsibility of the local authorities. To suggest that we can blame the Government is absurd.

The Government have increased by £866 million, I mean £966 million—I do not have my glasses on, so I apologise for that slip—the amount that local authorities have enjoyed in the latest spending round. In addition, in my area, Essex county council, which currently has the misfortune of being under the control of a Labour and Liberal Democrat pact, has received £25 million more from the Government as part of its SSA.

Despite that, the council has had the temerity to cut £1 million from the budget of that most essential of community services—the fire service. It ill behoves the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw), who answered my earlier intervention, to suggest that that cut was in any way the responsibility of the Government. He knows better than that: he should not seek to put the blame on the Government when it rests squarely on the shoulders of his colleagues and associates on the county council.

The fact that the fire service is making these complaints to a number of hon. Members shows that the Labour-controlled councils, about which the hon. Member for Blackburn was crowing, are dilatory in the way in which they treat it. They are clearly underfunding it all over the country, and it is causing great concern to the service and to those who rely on that magnificent service for their protection.

Having lost £1 million from the budget, my local service is facing the possibility that 41 front-line firemen may have to leave the service by March next year. It is only the Conservative party on Essex county council that has put up a fight to get the budget reinstated. If there was a shortage of money in Essex county council, one might make some accommodation for the budget cuts. The truth is that it is sitting on reserves of £120 million. Those reserves are tucked away in all sorts of budgets for goodness knows what purpose and what rainy day. If the prospect of cuts in the fire service is not a serious matter, I do not know what would be important enough to consider taking money out of those reserves.

I urge the firemen in Essex not to go through with the threatened strike, because the Conservatives have battled with the Labour group on Essex county council over the budget and have at least secured the promised increase of £250,000, which will be put back into the fire service budget. That will save the jobs of around 30 new firemen, but that is not good enough, and the Conservatives on the council intend to keep up the pressure.

It is no good, as I have said before and wish to say again, for the fire service to complain to us in the House as if the cuts were Government cuts. They are nothing of the sort. I urge the Government to make it clear again—as I am sure my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary will—that the real culprits are the county councillors and those in unitary authorities who are using

budget cuts to try to cause embarrassment to the Government. That is grossly misleading and grossly unfair, and will be unsuccessful.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Obviously, I disagree with much of what the hon. Lady has said, but tonight should not pass without a comment from one Labour Member from Essex, and I share her concern about the potential cuts in the fire service. I know that the Labour leader of Thurrock borough council has made representations to the county council, so this is not an issue on which, as the hon. Lady suggests, the Conservatives are Archangel Gabriels and Labour are otherwise. Many of us are concerned about the funding of essential public services, and I am one of them in Essex.

Mrs. Gorman: I wish the hon. Gentleman had as much influence with his county councillors as he appears to have with the Labour leader of Thurrock council. I urge the hon. Gentleman to turn his attention to and to criticise his Labour colleagues, to encourage them to do something about the problem. I also urge him to write to our fire officers to inform them that it is the stinginess of Labour and the Liberals on Essex county council that has caused the problem.

Like everyone else in the House, I am an admirer of the fire service. We all know that it does an excellent job and it deserves all the support that the Government's generous funding of local authorities allows it. I urge the hon. Members, when they vote, to make it clear to the fire service that the people they should be criticising are not in the Government but in the county councils and the unitary councils—many of them Labour-controlled today, unfortunately—so that the blame is placed where it belongs. In that way, pressure can be applied for the budgets to be reinstated, so that the fire services throughout the country can be manned to the level of safety that I am sure we all support.

9.17 pm

Mr. John Heppell (Nottingham, East): I am happy to support a motion that praises the fire service. It is treason to say it, but the amendment also praises the fire service, as has every hon. Member who has spoken, except for the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Lady Olga Maitland), who could not resist carping at the service. But that general praise only reflects what the Audit Commission has said, and what the general public think about the fire service.

Last year, Nottinghamshire county council tried a unique experiment, and opened its books. It revealed its financial problems, and considered the possibility of cuts of £50 million. In the event, cuts of only £25 million were made, but the potential cuts for the fire service in Nottinghamshire would have involved the loss of 200 full-time and part-time firemen, and 10 firefighting appliances. As part of the consultative process with the public, the county council held meetings and asked people to write and to phone in on a hotline to tell the council in which areas they thought the cuts—the Home Secretary calls them efficiency savings, but I will stick to the word "cuts"—should be made.

The people of Nottinghamshire were faced with cuts in the education service, the provision of social services, teacher numbers and social worker and home-help establishments, but the council received 100 letters stating that the fire service budget should not be cut. That was the priority of those who wrote those letters.

It was even more astonishing that there were 2,500 calls on the hotline. Of those callers, 1,900 gave priority to the fire service. That demonstrates the esteem in which the general public hold the fire service. The Fire Brigades Union organised a petition, which attracted more than 130,000 signatories. That is a vote of confidence in the fire service, bearing in mind that the population of Nottinghamshire is about 1 million.

The opening of the books created a great deal of debate in the county. Ordinary people, including teachers, head teachers, bishops, Members, and Members of the European Parliament—the entire community—asked for more Government money. I think that they were partially successful.

Sir Jim Lester (Broxtowe): The debate started on the basis that the potential cuts would amount to £50 million. Various options increased the total by £18 million, to about £68 million. That created havoc throughout Nottinghamshire. As the hon. Gentleman has said, the cuts eventually amounted to £22 million. It was something of a scare exercise.

Mr. Heppell: The hon. Gentleman's figures are not quite right. In any event, the council said, "This is what we shall have to do, and the potential cuts could amount to £50 million." The outcome was about half that projection. I do not accept that that was scaremongering. There were real worries.

The fire service budget will have to be cut by £300,000. Part of that will be met by a small reduction in staff and some small savings here and there. The majority of the cut will be met by reducing training. I know that the Home Secretary and the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) have said, and I am sure that the Minister will say, that the fire service is a local government responsibility, and has nothing to do with central Government. But let us focus on the facts.

We know that about three quarters of all local authorities already spend beyond their standard spending assessment, which is what the Government say is sufficient. Nottinghamshire spends £1.5 million in excess of its SSA. As I have said, Nottinghamshire is not alone in doing that. The Home Secretary seems to think that Derbyshire is awash with money, and that it has no problems. He suggests that money is being thrown at Derbyshire.

If that is so, why has Derbyshire had to make cuts amounting to £1.3 million? The cuts have meant the loss of a turntable ladder. A one-day staff station will be turned into a retained station. The service will lose three retained pumps. There will be a loss of eight rider-officer posts, 34 whole-time posts and 40 retained posts. Again, there will be cuts in training.

There will be cuts in Northamptonshire amounting to £147,000, which will be met mainly by reducing training. Cuts in Leicestershire will amount to £61,000. Appliances will not be replaced, and the number of posts will be frozen. Again, there will be cuts in training. In Lincolnshire, the cuts will amount to £68,000. Appliances and equipment generally will not be replaced. Similarly, there will be training cuts. There will be cuts in training everywhere.

[Mr. Heppell]

It is nonsensical to talk about helping the Fire Service College. As a result of cuts, authorities cannot afford to send people there for training. We are told, "Use it or lose it," but the college will be lost because authorities cannot afford to use it.

What does less training mean? Every time a firefighter answers a call, the outcome is possibly life-threatening. That is often the position in which a member of the public finds himself. It is almost always a life-threatening situation for a firefighter. Dedication, courage and bravery are all very well, but those qualities are not enough.

Firefighters require the proper equipment; and, probably above all else, they require the proper training. They need the training, to be familiar with a variety of situations. They need it to know exactly what procedures to adopt in a certain situation, and they need it so that they can act almost instinctively.

Firefighters do not have the luxury that is available to politicians—the opportunity to consider before acting. They do not have the luxury that is available to the Prime Minister, who can hesitate before every action. For a firefighter, that moment of hesitation might be the reason for someone's death. The training is needed, and the cuts are affecting it. They are not efficiency savings; they are putting the lives of the public, and the lives of firefighters, at risk.

I also want to make a point about fire safety. I chair the all-party group on home safety, and I worry when I see in Audit Commission reports that £20 million or so should be spent on fire prevention. The standard spending assessment takes account of £5.8 million, about a quarter of what is required. Every so often, a major tragedy occurs. When people are saved, it makes the headlines. Many people have been killed in fires at the Richmond hotel in Scarborough, in other houses in multiple occupation and while using leisure facilities.

That is not the reason for my interest in home safety, however; I am interested in that because of the little fires that happen every day, but are hardly mentioned in the media. They might just make a byline in the local press, or get a mention on regional television. We should remember that, every day, someone over 60 is killed in a house fire, and that two children die in house fires every week. Those statistics may seem insignificant on their own, but I do not want to talk about statistics. The devastation involved means that we must find more money to spend on fire prevention, rather than letting the firefighters deal with the consequences of our failure to do so.

It amazes me that we are still waiting for a Government response to the report of the interdepartmental review team on fire safety legislation enforcement. A number of the team's 61 recommendations mentioned transferring the enforcement of safety legislation and fire prevention from the fire service to local authorities in some cases, and to the Health and Safety Executive in others—but, most worrying to me, in some cases to private inspectors. There was also the possibility of a do-it-yourself scheme, requiring people to decide whether they were safe in terms of fire prevention.

I do not want fire prevention to be privatised, and I am sure that the general public do not want it. If I want to know something about my car, I ask a mechanic. If I want to know something about politics, I ask a politician—usually someone of my own political persuasion. If I want to know about fire prevention, I will ask a firefighter, because firefighters deal with fires and know how to deal with fire prevention.

I hope that a recommendation will be made, and that the Minister will tell us that the fire service will have a statutory duty to educate people about fire prevention. I want fire prevention to be where the public want it—in the hands of the fire service. We believe that fire prevention will be safe in its hands.

9.28 pm

Mr. Piers Merchant (Beckenham): I welcome the motion, for just one reason. I appreciate the opportunity that it gives me to pay tribute to the professionalism and the courage of the men and women in the fire service, and particularly those in the fire brigade that covers my area, the London fire brigade. I am surprised, however, that the Opposition should wish to spend their time attacking the operation of the fire service, for there is nothing to attack—certainly not the men and women who risk their lives to save others, the efficiency of the organisation behind them, which the Audit Commission praised so highly, or the safety of cover provided. Her Majesty's fire inspectorate sees to that, and there are minimum safety standards, with the vast majority of fire services providing cover well in excess of that. I should not be entirely surprised at the Opposition going down that route, bearing in mind their quite scurrilous attempt to run scares and play on false fears that they, along with certain officials in the Fire Brigades Union in my area, have conjured up.

People were induced to sign a petition—I have nothing against people signing petitions—on the reorganisation of the London fire brigade. The only problem is that when people were asked to sign it, they were told, first, that cuts were coming but not that those suggested cuts were only the initial response of the Labour-controlled authority, which it later significantly reduced. Secondly, people were told that the cuts were coming from the Government, which was not true, because the reorganisation plans were drawn up by the Labour-controlled London fire and civil defence authority.

Mr. Vivian Bendall (Ilford, North): Is my hon. Friend aware that the LFCDA had about £27 million in reserve? Is he further aware that the London fire brigade was considering purchasing a helicopter for the chief fire officer at enormous expense, which would have incurred enormous running costs, while at the same time considering closing fire stations and doing away with some appliances? It is quite disgraceful.

Mr. Merchant: My hon. Friend is entirely correct. The £27 million about which he spoke, which even the LFCDA's finance officer said needed to be drastically reduced, ought to be set against the £6 million or £7 million that it claimed it had to save and was trying to cut from its running budget. In other words, it has far in excess of what it said on which to draw, to cover the deficiency that it said existed.

People who were asked to sign the petition were misled about that and also led to believe that there would be reductions forthwith. Yet any plans for reductions in fire

cover need the approval of my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary. That approval is given only if Her Majesty's inspectors consider that the reductions are safe.

Thirdly, people were shown lists of proposed closures, all of which have been lifted, and reductions, a large proportion of which have been withdrawn, but not told at any stage of the extra pumps being introduced at some stations and of the new stations that were being planned. It is not surprising that people signed that petition. They signed it in false knowledge, with false expectations, so the petition is invalid.

In my constituency, cover will be improved in the final plan that has been forwarded to my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary. I thank the London fire chief for achieving that. At Beckenham fire station, there will be fewer off-ground calls principally because an extra pump is being installed at West Norwood. That, too, will help my constituency because its western side, which abuts the Norwood and West Norwood fire station area, will receive better cover. Otherwise, the cover in the immediate boundaries of my constituency will remain the same, including in Downham, where the proposed closure of the fire station has been withdrawn.

I freely acknowledge that there is a wider picture, too. I also acknowledge that there is a need for some change. People are always afraid of change, but in the fire service, as in other areas, change is necessary at times because circumstances, such as where people live and the nature of risk, also change. I am all in favour of that being regularly reviewed.

The London fire chief very honestly and professionally faced those facts when he drew up his recent report on future fire cover. He said that the

"present pattern of stations is inherited from predecessor authorities"—

that is, from some of the county councils that then existed. It is that long since the location of the stations was closely examined. He says that the cover has been largely unchanged for many years and states:

"It did not take fully into account the overall pattern of cover across the whole area."

Plainly, improvements could be brought about by some change there. His report also states:

"A number of the older stations were built in an era when fire cover was provided by horse-drawn, steam-operated appliances or in the earliest days of the internal combustion engine."

That is elegantly put. The report continues:

"As such, they were built close together to provide a suitable level of cover before the development of the present Home Office guidance on fire cover."

He says that such stations may become surplus to requirements when an opportunity arises of a site to replace two stations by one that is more centrally located. That makes sense.

One other example among many that I should like to share with the House is a description of the present cover on the river. The fire chief states:

"The service offered at present through the very nature and design of the vessels is considered to be inefficient and expensive with the fire boat frequently taking so long to attend the fire call that the incident is handled by other appliances and crews and the fire boat is turned back before actually reaching the incident."

That all shows that not everything needs to be changed, nor that there must be drastic cuts, none of which has been suggested. The report suggests a need for constant change and improvement, which are part of dynamic fire cover. That is what the fire chief, the expert, says, and I am happy to agree.

There must be no cuts for financial reasons. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, North (Mr. Bendall) said in his intervention, the London fire brigade is well funded by Government grant and by constituent authorities and has £27 million in reserve. I do not for a moment suggest that the reserve should be drawn upon, but in view of this year's deficit, there are ample funds. The minor changes in cover that the authority suggests should successfully achieve the objective of meeting the budget and providing high-quality cover.

The authority's first responsibility must be to provide high-quality cover, but it also has a responsibility to the taxpayer to achieve value for money. I am surprised that anyone should question that. I am in favour of achieving that as long as the quality of cover is not jeopardised, and I think that that is what the fire chief is striving to achieve. I commend him for that.

The Opposition motion is another feeble attempt to fuel a myth by running down quality services and failing to say what would be put in their place. The Opposition should acknowledge the hard work that is carried out by all those who are charged with the heavy responsibility of protecting the people from the perils of fire and similar risks. I include not just those who are in the front line, but the administrators, who work hard behind the scenes to ensure that the service operates efficiently. The people in the service deserve praise for providing one of our highest-quality and most essential services.

9.38 pm

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): There is no greater hypocrisy than to praise men and women who put their lives on the line and refusing to pay their dependants pensions. It is also hypocritical to say that they provide a marvellous service while refusing to fund their pension entitlement or the college that will train them, and refusing to make provision for the new unitary authorities that will have great difficulty in funding the changes. Above all, it is wrong to make it impossible for firefighters, who every day of their lives protect our constituents, to provide a high-quality service. There will not be replacement of their equipment, training or the necessary funding.

The debate has been clearly marked by those who understand that the provision of fire services is more important than the scoring of minor points in an imaginary election battle. It is so fundamental. It is a mark of how far the Government have fallen from taking responsibility that they are not able to say openly that they do not intend to provide the cash, but that they would prefer to blame local authorities, which are under considerable constraints. It is clear. The electorate understand it. Last week's results showed that and I hope that Ministers will, at long last, reconsider the population's absolute outrage at what they are doing day by day.

9.39 pm

Mr. George Howarth (Knowsley, North): I congratulate everyone who has taken part in the debate on this important subject, which we chose because, throughout the country, there is much concern about many aspects of the fire service.

[Mr. George Howarth]

It is a pleasure to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South-East Staffordshire (Mr. Jenkins) on his maiden speech. I have listened to many such speeches—I made one as a by-election victor—but his speech was witty and in keeping with the best traditions of the House: it was, of course, entirely non-political. I in particular and, I am sure, hon. Members look forward to many more speeches from him. I am sure that his stay in the House, like that of one of his distinguished predecessors whom he mentioned, Sir Thomas Guy, will be long.

On fire service funding, my hon. Friend raised the issue of the coastal factor, which he rightly said was a difficult concept to grapple with if one represents part of Staffordshire. He will know, however, that the coastal factor is calculated by a highly scientific formula. The formula is £4.35 multiplied by the length of the coast line and divided by the population. There is a novel concept: multiple regression analysis combined with cartography. All is not well, therefore, and I am not entirely certain that the coastal factor will endure for too many years.

In their own characteristic styles, the hon. Members for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) and for Sutton and Cheam (Lady Olga Maitland) raised—

Mr. Eddie Loyden (Liverpool, Garston): In their inimitable styles.

Mr. Howarth: Who am I to disagree with my hon. Friend, who has had long experience?

In their inimitable and characteristic styles, the hon. Members for Billericay and for Sutton and Cheam raised the questions of London and Essex and went into rants about the Labour-controlled local authorities responsible in both cases. However, they failed to deal with the fact—and my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) made this point powerfully—that local government can respond only to the financial framework that central Government sets. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam should be quiet. I listened to her in silence.

The difficulties that fire authorities in Essex and in London are experiencing stem from the manner in which central Government have dealt with fire service financing not only in the past two or three years, but since the late 1970s and early 1980s. If the Government do not accept that responsibility, central Government will continually try to blame local government for what is going on.

Mr. Bendall: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Howarth: I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman because I have only a short time and he was not here at the beginning of the debate.

The Government must accept that they have those responsibilities. The hon. Members for Billericay and for Sutton and Cheam and their colleagues who have spoken in the debate may feel that the responsibilities taken by local government go too far, but, under section 19 of the Fire Services Act 1947, the Home Secretary must approve those. He must verify each reduction, whether it involves job losses, tenders being taken out of commission or fire stations being closed. If they have a gripe over those they should take it up with the Home Secretary, who has created the financial framework and will ultimately make the decisions.

Lady Olga Maitland *rose—*

Mr. Howarth: I shall give way to the hon. Lady, because I mentioned her, but I hope that she will be brief.

Lady Olga Maitland: Will the hon. Gentleman take into account the fact that in London alone there is £27 million in the reserves? How can he suggest that the Government are underfunding fire authorities when they have managed to build up such a sum, bearing in mind, too, the fact that each year there is a real increase in support?

Mr. Howarth: I sometimes wonder whether the hon. Lady listens to the debates in the House at all. Sometimes I feel that she may be on another planet when such matters are being discussed. The London fire and civil defence authority has operated within the guidelines set by the Department of the Environment for the maintenance of balances and reserves. It has to put money aside for the pension fund contributions that, as she has heard the Home Secretary acknowledge, represent a real problem for local authorities, because the pension fund is unfunded. The contributions in any one year do not match the payments that have to be made. The hon. Lady should understand the facts before she gets to her feet to condemn local authorities.

Mr. Howard: If the hon. Gentleman is so keen on the facts, why does he not acknowledge that the director of finance of the London fire and civil defence authority has said that the reserves are too high? Does he suggest that the director of finance does not know that provision has to be made for pensions?

While the hon. Gentleman is worrying about his answer to that question, will he join us in seeking a withdrawal of the strike ballots in Essex and Derbyshire? Will he call on the Fire Brigades Union to withdraw the ballots in those two counties?

Mr. Howarth: It is a bit rich when a Home Secretary who has spent so much time being defended in the courts attacks Labour-controlled authorities—[HON. MEMBERS: "Answer the question."] If the Home Secretary believes that the level of reserves in London is wrong, will he tell us what the right level of reserves would be? Will he also tell us what the fire services have done wrong in terms of the guidelines from the Department of the Environment, within which they have operated?

I have little time left, so I want to move on and draw a sharp contrast between the speeches by the hon. Members for Billericay and for Sutton and Cheam and those made by my hon. Friends, especially my hon. Friends the Members for Tyne Bridge (Mr. Clelland), for Nottingham, East (Mr. Heppell) and for Crewe and Nantwich. From direct experience and knowledge of the fire service, my hon. Friends understand vividly exactly what the effects of the Government's failure to face the difficulties in fire service financing are. They put their cases strongly and well.

The Government's failure is not a new phenomenon. Dennis Davis, the president of the Chief and Assistant Chief Fire Officers Association, has been quoted at some length from more recent occasions, but in his address to the 1995 conference at Harrogate he said:

"But just look at what's happening. At a time when CACFOA members sense real opportunity to move into the next phase of fire service development, to change for the better, to move our community to fire safety, through prevention rather than cure, we are on shifting sands and effectively lost in the fog of indecision."

That is the Government's record on fire service funding.

Another issue covered was the future of the Fire Service College. The hon. Member for Cirencester and Tewkesbury (Mr. Clifton–Brown) raised the matter again, having also done so on a previous occasion when we debated the fire service—rightly so, as he is the local constituency Member. He seems rather embarrassed by the support that we have lent him, but I tell him again that we are serious about the need for a long-term strategy for the future of the college—and I accept the fact that he is serious about it, too. I would join him and any Minister in any reasonable plan that they could devise for that purpose.

However, the hon. Gentleman seems prepared to wait a long time for Baroness Blatch to come up with a solution. So far there is an options paper, which has yet to see the light of day, a working party here and a sub-committee there, all considering the matter, yet nobody has come up with a solution to the problem created by the Government in 1992. We hope that the security of the Fire Service College will be assured, but there is no solution on the horizon, and until there is, if I were the hon. Gentleman I should be very gloomy.

Mr. Jeff Rooker (Birmingham, Perry Barr): I have listened to most of the debate, but no one has mentioned the remarkable contribution of the voluntary sector and the fire service in the creation of the Young Firefighters Association. The association is a youth movement for those aged from 12 to 18, and was born out of the public service in, I might add, the west midlands. We should pay tribute to the association, as it is almost unique for such a movement to be created in the British public service.

Mr. Howarth: I obviously join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to that organisation.

Finally, I wish to refer to the question of fire safety and deregulation. In what I think was the most disgraceful section of any speech that I have heard the Home Secretary make—there have been some pretty disgraceful ones among that number—he said that our arguments for proper regulation of certain matters related to fire safety amounted to "red tape". The Home Secretary considers the regulation of children's nightclothes and of houses in multiple occupation to be "red tape".

Mr. Howard: The hon. Gentleman must not misconstrue and distort what I said in that way. I said that it behoves any responsible Government to look at regulations to see if they are necessary and, if not, to eliminate or revise them. Any party that condemns any attempt to scrutinise regulations—as the hon. Member for Blackburn did—is a party of red tape.

Mr. Howarth: It is a frequent phenomenon, but the Home Secretary's cage has been rattled. Does he deny that the Government are considering deregulating children's nightclothes, houses in multiple occupation and foam-filled furniture? If so, will he give us a categorical assurance about that? If he does not, I will accept entirely that he considers such regulations to be nothing more than red tape.

Mr. Howard *rose—*

Mr. Howarth: Will he give us a categorical assurance?

Mr. Howard: The hon. Gentleman bears out the charges that I levelled against him. Of course we must look at all these matters to see—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] Listen to Opposition Members. Of course we must look and see whether regulations that were put in place years ago still match the requirements of today. Any party that is not even prepared to look at those regulations is behaving in a disgraceful fashion and is a party of red tape.

Mr. Howarth: The Home Secretary has a strange view of history, as the regulations to which I have referred were put in place in 1988. But he has given no categorical assurance. The Government are considering deregulating children's nightclothes, foam-filled furniture and houses in multiple occupation. *[Interruption.]* The Home Secretary says "Yes". He should be ashamed of himself and of the stewardship by his Government of the fire service. He should go, and the sooner the better.

9.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under–Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Tom Sackville): I shall lower the temperature a bit. First, I pay tribute to hon. Member for South–East Staffordshire (Mr. Jenkins) on his maiden speech, which was distinguished and witty and showed a great sweep of history. I will admonish him on one thing, however. He should not make dangerous departures into single currencies—even from 1,000 years ago—in the presence of my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman). However, I congratulate him on an entertaining speech.

Everyone who has spoken has praised the fire service, and has acknowledged the enormous value that the people of this country attach to firefighters and the great confidence that they have in them. My hon. Friend the Member for Cirencester and Tewkesbury (Mr. Clifton–Brown) made a thoughtful and constructive speech, and clearly understood the complexities of the factors affecting the future of the Fire Service College. He referred to its evaluation, and this is being investigated at present by the Treasury. That is an important point, but his central point was that all fire authorities must take advantage of this excellent facility. The college needs such business to ensure its future. I assure my hon. Friend that the Government share his view that the college should have a long-term future, and we look forward to working with him to that end.

My hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) and the hon. and learned Member for Montgomery (Mr. Carlile) mentioned the so-called

[Mr. Tom Sackville]

pensions time bomb. I assure them that the Government take the issue of the future pressure of pensions very seriously. In fact, this year we added £14 million to help to deal with the problem. I assure them that that issue will be at the forefront of our minds in the future.

The hon. and learned Member for Montgomery mentioned the formula and I assure him that the Department of the Environment has commissioned research into the cost of providing services in densely populated and sparsely populated areas. The Government and local authority associations are working together in a technical group to explore the possibility of alternative formulae. However, I warn the hon. and learned Gentleman that we need to find an alternative that does not unreasonably increase the grants for some brigades while disproportionately reducing them for others. We want a fair formula.

Some hon. Members referred to the scare stories about the fire service. It worries me that the fire service is being used in the way that the national health service has been used over recent years—that is, to frighten people. I believe that on Opposition day debates the Labour party looks for things that will frighten people in their everyday lives, that it invents stories about them and that it brings in all sorts of evidence from political allies to support them. That is a dangerous tendency.

The London fire and civil defence authority was mentioned by my hon. Friends the Members for Sutton and Cheam (Lady Olga Maitland), for Beckenham (Mr. Merchant) and for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman). They are all correct in saying that during the threatened closure of four fire stations in London a whole lot of misleading information was put around and that a lot of people were frightened about fire services in their area quite needlessly because they were given highly selective information.

There is plenty of evidence that while the London fire authority was talking about the closure of four fire stations because of the lack of Government funding, it was not saying that it had £27 million in reserve—as was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam—and it was not saying that it was projecting an underspend of £3.7 million for that year. At the time that the authority decided—lo and behold—that it was possible not to close the fire stations, there had been no change in financial circumstances. What does this mean? It is fairly obvious that the authority had absolutely no intention of taking this action and that the whole thing was a political manoeuvre.

We have a worrying situation because some of the people who have the stewardship of fire brigades, by being elected members of fire authorities, think that it is acceptable for them to use fire as a political football. When that happens we shall see a further lowering of political debate. We have seen it over the years in all sorts of spheres, of which health is the most obvious. The London fire authority has made that manoeuvre; I hope that it will not be followed by other fire authorities around the country and I hope that the Labour party will disassociate itself from it. If the Labour party does not, it will have plumbed new depths. I ask the House to reject the motion.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:

The House divided: Ayes 256, Noes 285

Division No. 123] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Alton, David
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Ms Janet *(Ros'dale)*
Armstrong, Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Banks, Tony *(Newham NW)*
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beckett, Rt Hon Margaret
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Betts, Clive
Blunkett, David
Boateng, Paul
Bradley, Keith
Bray, Dr Jeremy
Brown, Nicholas *(N upon T.E.)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burden, Richard
Byers, Stephen
Caborn, Richard
Callaghan, Jim
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(Fife NE)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Carlile, Alexander *(Montgomery)*
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clark, Dr David *(South Shields)*
Clarke, Tom *(Monklands W)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Mrs Ann
Coffey, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Covy SE)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John
Dafis, Cynog
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Alistair
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Bryan *(Oldham C'tral)*
Davies, Chris *(L'Boro & S'worth)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham, H'dge Hl)*
Dewar, Donald
Dixon, Don
Dobson, Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eastham, Ken
Etherington, Bill
Evans, John *(St Helens N)*
Fatchett, Derek
Faulds, Andrew
Field, Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Flynn, Paul
Forsythe, Clifford *(S Antrim)*
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foulkes, George
Fraser, John
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Garrett, John
George, Bruce
Gerrard, Neil
Gilbert, Rt Hon Dr John
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mildred
Graham, Thomas
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike
Hanson, David
Hardy, Peter
Harman, Ms Harriet
Harvey, Nick
Hattersley, Rt Hon Roy
Henderson, Doug
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hoey, Kate
Hogg, Norman *(Cumbernauld)*
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Howarth, Alan *(Strat'rd-on-A)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley North)*
Howells, Dr Kim *(Pontypridd)*
Hoyle, Doug
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Robert *(Aberdeen N)*
Hughes, Roy *(Newport E)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark)*
Hutton, John
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Glenda *(H'stead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Sheff'ld, H)*
Jamieson, David
Janner, Greville
Jenkins, Brian *(SE Staff)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn and D'side)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Lynne *(B'ham S O)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd, SW)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keen, Alan
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross,C&S)*
Kennedy, Jane *(L'pool Br'dg'n)*
Khabra, Piara S

Kilfoyle, Peter
Kirkwood, Archy
Lestor, Joan *(Eccles)*
Lewis, Terry
Litherland, Robert
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Stretford)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loyden, Eddie
Lynne, Ms Liz
McAllion, John
McCartney, Ian
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McKelvey, William
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
Maclennan, Robert
McMaster, Gordon
McNamara, Kevin
MacShane, Denis
McWilliam, John
Madden, Max
Maddock, Diana
Mandelson, Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester, S)*
Martin, Michael J *(Springburn)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Michael
Meale, Alan
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffield Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Rhodri
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mowlam, Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Paul
Oakes, Rt Hon Gordon
O'Brien, Mike *(N W'kshire)*
O'Brien, William *(Normanton)*
Olner, Bill
Parry, Robert
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pope, Greg
Powell, Ray *(Ogmore)*
Prentice, Bridget *(Lew'm E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Quinn, Ms Joyce
Radice, Giles
Randall, Stuart
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Dr John
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Co'try NW)*
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ross, William *(E Londonderry)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruddock, Joan
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shore, Rt Hon Peter
Short, Clare
Simpson, Alan
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Chris *(Is'ton S & F'sbury)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Spearing, Nigel
Spellar, John
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stott, Roger
Strang, Dr. Gavin
Straw, Jack
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Walker, Rt Hon Sir Harold
Wardell, Gareth *(Gower)*
Wareing, Robert N
Watson, Mike
Welsh, Andrew
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Sw'n W)*
Williams, Alan W *(Carmarthen)*
Worthington, Tony
Wray, Jimmy
Wright, Dr Tony
Young, David *(Bolton SE)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Eric Clarke and
Mr. Jon Owen Jones.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(East Surrey)*
Aitken, Rt Hon Jonathan
Alexander, Richard
Alison, Rt Hon Michael *(Selby)*
Allason, Rupert *(Torbay)*
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, James
Arnold, Jacques *(Gravesham)*
Ashby, David
Aspinwall, Jack
Atkins, Rt Hon Robert
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Mole V)*
Baker, Nicholas *(North Dorset)*
Baldry, Tony
Banks, Matthew *(Southport)*
Bates, Michael
Batiste, Spencer
Bellingham, Henry
Bendall, Vivian
Beresford, Sir Paul
Biffen, Rt Hon John
Body, Sir Richard
Bonsor, Sir Nicholas
Booth, Hartley
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Eltham)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Virginia
Bowden, Sir Andrew
Bowis, John
Boyson, Rt Hon Sir Rhodes
Brandreth, Gyles
Brazier, Julian
Bright, Sir Graham
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Brown, M *(Brigg & Cl'thorpes)*
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(South Dorset)*
Budgen, Nicholas
Burt, Alistair
Butcher, John
Butler, Peter
Carlisle, John *(Luton North)*
Carlisle, Sir Kenneth *(Lincoln)*
Carrington, Matthew
Carttiss, Michael
Cash, William
Channon, Rt Hon Paul
Chapman, Sir Sydney
Churchill, Mr
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rochford)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Ru'cliff)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coe, Sebastian
Colvin, Michael
Congdon, David
Conway, Derek
Coombs, Anthony *(Wyre For'st)*
Coombs, Simon *(Swindon)*
Cope, Rt Hon Sir John
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Couchman, James
Cran, James
Currie, Mrs Edwina *(S D'by'ire)*
Curry, David *(Skipton & Ripon)*
Davies, Quentin *(Stamford)*
Davis, David *(Boothferry)*
Day, Stephen
Deva, Nirj Joseph
Devlin, Tim
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James
Dover, Den
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Dunn, Bob
Durant, Sir Anthony
Dykes, Hugh
Eggar, Rt Hon Tim
Elletson, Harold
Evans, David *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Evans, Jonathan *(Brecon)*
Evans, Nigel *(Ribble Valley)*
Evans, Roger *(Monmouth)*
Evennett, David
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fenner, Dame Peggy
Field, Barry *(Isle of Wight)*
Forman, Nigel
Forsyth, Rt Hon Michael *(Stirling)*
Forth, Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam *(Woodspring)*
Fox, Rt Hon Sir Marcus
Freeman, Rt Hon Roger
French, Douglas
Fry, Sir Peter
Gale, Roger
Gallie, Phil
Gardiner, Sir George
Garnier, Edward
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Alastair
Goodson-Wickes, Dr Charles
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorst, Sir John
Grant, Sir A *(SW Cambs)*
Greenway, Harry *(Ealing N)*
Greenway, John *(Ryedale)*
Griffiths, Peter *(Portsmouth, N)*
Grylls, Sir Michael
Gummer, Rt Hon John Selwyn
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archibald
Hamilton, Neil *(Tatton)*
Hanley, Rt Hon Jeremy
Hannam, Sir John
Hargreaves, Andrew
Harris, David
Haselhurst, Sir Alan
Hawkins, Nick
Hawksley, Warren
Hayes, Jerry
Heald, Oliver
Heath, Rt Hon Sir Edward
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hendry, Charles
Higgins, Rt Hon Sir Terence
Hill, James *(Southampton Test)*
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas *(G'tham)*
Horam, John
Hordern, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howell, Rt Hon David *(G'dford)*
Howell, Sir Ralph *(N Norfolk)*
Hughes, Robert G *(Harrow W)*
Hunt, Rt Hon David *(Wirral W)*
Hunt, Sir John *(Ravensbourne)*
Hunter, Andrew
Hurd, Rt Hon Douglas
Jack, Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Jessel, Toby
Johnson Smith, Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Gwilym *(Cardiff N)*
Jones, Robert B *(W Hertfdshr)*
Jopling, Rt Hon Michael
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom
Kirkhope, Timothy
Knapman, Roger
Knight, Mrs Angela *(Erewash)*
Knight, Rt Hon Greg *(Derby N)*
Knight, Dame Jill *(Bir'm E'st'n)*
Knox, Sir David
Kynoch, George *(Kincardine)*
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamont, Rt Hon Norman
Lang, Rt Hon Ian
Lawrence, Sir Ivan
Legg, Barry
Leigh, Edward
Lester, Sir James *(Broxtowe)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Lord, Michael
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Madel, Sir David
Maitland, Lady Olga
Major, Rt Hon John
Malone, Gerald
Mans, Keith
Marland, Paul

Marshall, Sir Michael *(Arundel)*
Martin, David *(Portsmouth S)*
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
Mayhew, Rt Hon Sir Patrick
Mellor, Rt Hon David
Merchant, Piers
Mills, Iain
Mitchell, Andrew *(Gedling)*
Mitchell, Sir David *(NW Hants)*
Monro, Rt Hon Sir Hector
Montgomery, Sir Fergus
Nelson, Anthony
Neubert, Sir Michael
Newton, Rt Hon Tony
Nicholls, Patrick
Nicholson, David *(Taunton)*
Norris, Steve
Onslow, Rt Hon Sir Cranley
Oppenheim, Phillip
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Patnick, Sir Irvine
Patten, Rt Hon John
Pattie, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Pawsey, James
Pickles, Eric
Porter, David *(Waveney)*
Rathbone, Tim
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Renton, Rt Hon Tim
Richards, Rod
Riddick, Graham
Rifkind, Rt Hon Malcolm
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Raymond *(Ab'd'n S)*
Robinson, Mark *(Somerton)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Mid Kent)*
Rumbold, Rt Hon Dame Angela
Ryder, Rt Hon Richard
Sackville, Tom
Sainsbury, Rt Hon Sir Timothy
Scott, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
Shaw, David *(Dover)*
Shaw, Sir Giles *(Pudsey)*
Shephard, Rt Hon Gillian
Shepherd, Sir Colin *(Hereford)*
Shepherd, Richard *(Aldridge)*
Shersby, Sir Michael
Skeet, Sir Trevor
Soames, Nicholas
Speed, Sir Keith
Spencer, Sir Derek
Spicer, Sir James *(W Dorset)*
Spicer, Sir Michael *(S Worcs)*
Spink, Dr Robert
Sproat, Iain
Squire, Robin *(Hornchurch)*
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stephen, Michael
Stern, Michael
Stewart, Allan
Streeter, Gary
Sumberg, David
Sweeney, Walter
Sykes, John
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy *(Southend, E)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomason, Roy
Thompson, Sir Donald *(C'er V)*
Thompson, Patrick *(Norwich N)*
Thurnham, Peter
Townend, John *(Bridlington)*
Townsend, Cyril D *(Bexl'yh'th)*
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Trotter, Neville
Vaughan, Sir Gerard
Viggers, Peter
Waldegrave, Rt Hon William
Walden, George
Walker, Bill *(N Tayside)*
Waller, Gary
Ward, John
Wardle, Charles *(Bexhill)*
Watts, John
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Ray
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Ann
Wiggin, Sir Jerry
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macc'fld)*
Wood, Timothy
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Simon Burns and
Mr. Patrick McLoughlin.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 30 (Questions on amendments), and agreed to.*

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House recognises that fire brigades in the United Kingdom provide an unfailingly effective service to the public, pays tribute to the bravery of fire-fighters, who risk their lives in difficult and often dangerous circumstances, and welcomes the Government's continuing support for the fire service.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Morris): With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 101(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation).

EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES

That the draft European Communities (Definition of Treaties) (Partnership and Co-operation Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States and the Republic of Kazakhstan) Order 1996, which was laid before this House on 29th February, be approved.

EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES

That the draft European Communities (Definition of Treaties) (Partnership and Co-operation Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States and the Republic of Moldova) Order 1996, which was laid before this House on 29th February, be approved.

EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES

That the draft European Communities (Definition of Treaties) (Partnership and Co-operation Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States and the Kyrgyz Republic) Order 1996, which was laid before this House on 29th February, be approved.

EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES

That the draft European Communities (Definition of Treaties) (Partnership and Co-operation Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States and the Republic of Belarus) Order 1996, which was laid before this House on 29th February, be approved.—*[Mr. Ottaway.]*

Question agreed to.

COMMONWEALTH DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION BILL

Ordered,

That, in respect of the Commonwealth Development Corporation Bill, notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time.—*[Mr. Ottaway.]*

Green Belt (Sutton Coldfield)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Ottaway.]*

10.13 pm

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): I have a number of reasons for discussing the subject of the green belt around Sutton Coldfield. There is enormous concern in my constituency about plans to change the green belt because, at the moment, no fewer than three major proposals have been put forward—two for industrial development and one for housing—involving more than 500 acres of land.

Ever since I was elected Member of Parliament for Sutton Coldfield in 1974, my constituency has faced the same perpetual problem. As it is situated on the outer edge of Birmingham, we are under constant pressure from development. As a result, in the past 20 years, housing and commercial and industrial development has taken place. Many of the fields that used to ring my constituency have disappeared with much of the open land.

No one could accuse Sutton Coldfield of not having had its fair share of development. I am not arguing a case of "not in my back yard", because much of my back yard has been developed already. Thanks to the tireless work of local councillors, the development that has taken place is acceptable. We have not had the unplanned, unattractive development such as has disfigured the outskirts of many midlands towns, but there is no question that development has occurred at a price.

The new houses have brought new pressures for services such as education. Each year, more pressure is put on schools in Sutton Coldfield, and each year children are threatened with the prospect of not finding places in schools in their area. Demand exceeds supply. Schools such as Arthur Terry, John Willmott, Fairfax and Plantsbrook face more demand than they can cope with. Bishop Vesey and Sutton girls school have 10 applicants for each place. There is no sign that the Birmingham education department plans to meet the extra demand by building a new school, although I believe that one is required.

In that context, I raise first the issue of the new houses that it is proposed should be built off Duttons lane. Although the council says that it is officially not green belt land, there is no question about the quality of the open space there. The briefest visit to my constituency and to that area will confirm the value and attractiveness of that open land. One of my constituents, Richard Harwood, has written to me saying that the plan would

"devastate the essential rural nature of the outlying districts. There is no question of this being 'in-fill development' or using land which could not be utilised for any other purpose. This is all an area which is used by many people from Sutton Coldfield and the surrounding area as a means of getting away from houses, traffic and other urban nuisances. At the present time, part of the land is used for farming and part for riding stables and at the weekends, the roads around are well used for people riding horses, cycling, jogging".

Nevertheless, a plan has been brought forward that involves the construction of 500 extra homes. That will clearly not only destroy the open land, but place even greater pressure on already overcrowded schools. It is that kind of pressure and urban sprawl that I oppose. Although Duttons lane does not theoretically fit the council's green belt criteria, I shall help residents to oppose the proposal.

As to the 40 acres of land off Duttons lane, Birmingham council claims that no site is available for industrial development in the inner city. Regardless of whether that is true, the same cannot be said of housing sites. It would be far better to seek such sites in Birmingham, rather than always to push into the countryside.

My main intention this evening is to refer to two developments that undoubtedly threaten the green belt and the open land around Sutton Coldfield. I believe that they pose the biggest threat to the green belt in the 22 years for which I have represented the constituency. Minworth and Walmley face a twin challenge which, unless it is resisted successfully, will lead to the progressive destruction of the green belt.

I shall explain. In the search for industrial development sites, including sites for inward investment, two virtually adjoining sites have been proposed. The first comprises no fewer than 330 acres on one side of the Sutton Coldfield bypass around the village of Minworth. It has been advocated by Birmingham council as one of the sites to be developed. The second site is directly opposite, virtually adjoining it on the other side of the bypass. It covers 140 acres and is being proposed by P and O Properties. If that site were used, it would fill the remaining open space between the edge of Walmley and the bypass. The proposal from P and O Properties is that the land should be used for industrial development.

By any standards, these are massive developments—they cover almost 500 acres. Perhaps I might say why I, with my colleagues who represent Walmley on Birmingham council—Councillors Hudson, Birbeck and June Fuller—oppose the proposals.

There is no doubt that this is green belt land. It is not just a matter of official designation. I have seen some green belt land and wondered about the designation, but in this case any reasonable person would regard it as green belt land. It is good open land that is being farmed. If land such as that is simply taken over and used for factories, no green belt land is secure, and a precedent would be set for the land on both sides of the bypass around Sutton Coldfield. It would mean infilling for mile after mile up the edge of my constituency.

Such developments would obviously place extra strain on the services in Sutton Coldfield. I have already talked about education. If what I predict takes place, and even more development occurs, the inevitable result must be new pressures on schools in Sutton Coldfield without any plans for how the new needs are to be met. In addition, there would be pressures on all other services, including roads and transport.

Most important, there is no doubt about the strength of feeling about the proposals among residents of Sutton Coldfield. I have received dozens of letters protesting about the plans for industrial development. They are not standard letters, all worded the same, as is sometimes the case with protest movements. I have many letters written by different constituents who set out in their different and individual ways the case against the development.

I shall quote from two such letters. The first concerns the development around Minworth. It is written by a lady who has been a resident of Birmingham for 36 years. She says:

"I have seen many changes, some great achievements for Birmingham eg. The National Exhibition Centre, the National Indoor Arena, Symphony Hall to name but a few, but I have also seen poor planning eg. tower block council dwellings, the Bull Ring (as it presently stands)".

She says that the proposal is damaging and sets out a list of the reasons why.

The second letter—it is just an example and I have dozens of them—has been written by another lady to the director of planning. She says that she has lived in Walmley for 29 years and feels that it has seen too much development of green belt land. She says that she has lived at her present address—this must be the case for many people—only since September 1995, and that she was

"attracted to the property by the fact that it was a nice quiet estate with green fields at the end of the road and not an industrial eyesore."

She was persuaded by the fact that she was given a categorical assurance that the green belt would remain secure and permanent.

I have given a flavour of some of the letters that I have received, and I can assure my hon. Friend the Minister that I have received dozens more about Duttons lane. Those quotations bring me to my main contention tonight. The proposal concerning the Minworth site is now open to public consultation—although there has been no consultation with me, as the Member of Parliament for Sutton Coldfield, prior to the announcement of the proposals—because that is what is required. The procedure will culminate in a recommendation to the planning committee of Birmingham council, probably later this month.

It should be emphasised that the majority owner of the Minworth land is Birmingham council itself, which owns 207 acres out of 330—so it is Birmingham council's proposal that the land should be used for industrial development. The land is owned by Birmingham council and it will benefit. The council has said that

"development of the site could give rise to major capital receipts."

The decision that is required to be taken will be taken by Birmingham council. I would be delighted to be proved wrong, but the likeliest outcome is that the application will be approved.

The decision will come to the Department of the Environment and my hon. Friend the Secretary of State. The initial decision for the Department is not whether it is right or wrong for the development to go ahead, but whether to call the proposal in and to have a public inquiry so that the arguments can be independently explored and assessed. It is my basic contention that that must be done.

A public inquiry is necessary in respect of the land around Minworth and the land between Walmley and the bypass, of which the council is part owner. In other words, both sites, which together stretch to almost 500 acres in undoubted green belt land, require an independent check, and the expert check of an inquiry in which the public, the councillors and the Member of Parliament can put their points of view. It would be wrong for green belt land to be used up without any check. It would, in my view, be indefensible if the public who live near, overlook and enjoy the land were not to have the opportunity to put their point of view. That would be a denial of natural justice.

What argument is advanced in favour of the developments? The argument is that industrial development will bring jobs. I do not dispute that that could be the case, but it is important to recognise the constitutional and moral position. A company, however big and however important, cannot override planning laws or the intention to retain a green belt around our towns and cities. It would make a mockery of the whole green belt system if a company were able to say that a particular site was exactly the site that it had been looking for and that it required the site now. The public who live around the green belt have rights too. They have bought homes and made their decisions on the assurance that there was a green belt that would be upheld. In other words, the rights of my constituents must be protected too.

I understand that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will not be able to give an assurance tonight that the application will be called in, for the very good reason that—as we debate the subject—he has not received any application, but my aim is to tell him how strongly local public opinion feels about the issue. There is concern and anger that the developments should be proposed at all. I am opposed to the developments and I believe that my constituents are predominantly opposed to them.What we want above all is an opportunity to put our case to an inquiry. It is the independence of an inquiry that matters and the skill of the inspector that matters.

The matter cannot be settled by a council that is the major owner of one site and part owner of another. The council advocates one course. That is its right, but it is not its right to decide without check the future of the land. Above all, I want a proper determination of green belt policy. I hope that, tonight, my hon. Friend the Minister will, at the very least, make a statement on the Government's determination that the green belt will be defended. If it is eroded and destroyed in the way that is proposed in my constituency, the future of green belt policy will be limited.

10.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment (Sir Paul Beresford): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) on securing the debate and thank him as well. He has used constituency examples of a frequently raised conundrum. Britain is a small island with areas that are relatively densely populated. We have a bright and growing economy, which leads to demands for growth in the housing, leisure and industrial sectors. There is also the demand that we jealously guard our precious green belt. That has been spelt out clearly by my right hon. Friend.

Much has been done to try to meet both demands. Much of the Department's approach to planning, urban regeneration and movement in the inner cities has taken that direction. The drive to re-use sites is incredible. Even Birmingham council, with its planning policy, has been persuaded to follow this line. I understand that about 50 per cent. of new houses in the Birmingham area are on re-used sites. That is encouraging. If we can persuade an authority like Birmingham to take that approach, there is hope for us all.

My right hon. Friend asked about our policy on green belts. It was set out clearly in planning policy guidance note No. 2 of January 1995. Furthermore, the west

midlands planning guidance, which was published in September 1995, strongly reaffirmed national green belt policy. It was made clear that there was no case for a fundamental review of the west midlands green belt. My right hon. Friend will be able to use that.

The guidance also proposed, as it were, that the region should be ready to provide up to two large sites for new industrial and commercial investment, each by a large multinational organisation, to the major benefit of the regional economy. The sites were to be of at least 50 hectares. I apologise for using metric measures. Perhaps it is a sign of my age or perhaps I am being a bit ambitious. The sites were to be in or adjacent to the metropolitan area or other large settlements. The guidance recognised that the sites might—I emphasise might—exceptionally need to be in whole or in part in the green belt.

As my right hon. Friend is almost certainly aware, there is a study in progress. It is being led by the West Midlands Forum of Local Authorities. The aim is to identify suitable general locations for the sites. We await the recommendations with interest. Any sites that are identified as a result of the study recommendations should come forward in development plans, which will be subject to the usual planning procedures of consultation, objection and public inquiry, for example.

My right hon. Friend has made clear—in effect, by heavy typing—his concern and that of his constituents about the proposals for major industrial development in the Minworth area of Sutton Coldfield. Residents in the area are, of course, concerned. That concern was expressed clearly and emphatically tonight.

We do not know yet whether the forum will recommend Minworth as a general locati ר for major industrial development. If it does, it will have to surmount some major hurdles. We would consider the proposal very carefully against our national planning policy on green belts, and against the regional planning guidance for the west midlands, including the green belt. We would want to consider especially whether exceptional circumstances exist, and are so exceptional that they might justify development in the green belt. We would need to be certain that any development would not set a precedent for further development in the area, about which my right hon. Friend has warned.

We would expect Birmingham to amend its unitary development plan to incorporate any such development proposal. That would open it up to detailed scrutiny through the normal process of public consultation, objection and—as requested by my right hon. Friend—public inquiry. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State would have power to direct modifications to the plan, or to call it in for his own decision.

If a planning application was made in the meantime for such a proposal, Birmingham city council would have to give local people the opportunity to comment, and would be unable to grant planning permission without referring it to us, because it would be a departure from its plan. We would have to consider very carefully, in the light of our own policies, Birmingham's plans, all the comments on the application—we have heard some pretty emphatic comments this evening—and whether it should be called in by the Secretary of State for his own decision. As my right hon. Friend suggested, I cannot go further than that at this stage.

My right hon. Friend touched on the planning application recently submitted for 500 houses on the land south of Duttons lane. I am afraid that I must confirm that the site is not in the green belt and is currently allocated for housing development in the unitary development plan, which has been through all the necessary procedures. There is only one small proviso, which is not particularly helpful—that the site should not be developed until 1997 at the earliest, but we are nearly there, of course.

I understand that Birmingham city council has not yet reached a view on the recent application, so at least that procedure must be gone through, and the application has not been referred to me. I can confirm, however—I consider this important—that the Government remain strongly committed to the preservation of an effective green belt in the west midlands to the east and north of Sutton Coldfield. Development in the green belt may take place only in exceptional circumstances, and the onus is on the proponents of the development to show that such circumstances exist. If a specific proposal for development is made, either within or outside the context of the forum study that is now in progress, we shall consider very carefully whether it should be called in for the Secretary of State's decision. I have certainly heard every word that has been said this evening, but at this stage I cannot say what the outcome will be.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-three minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 9 May 1996

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

BODMIN MOOR COMMONS BILL *[Lords]* (*By Order*)

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time upon Thursday 16 May.

Oral Answers to Questions

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Farmers (Paperwork)

1. **Mr. Dover:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he has taken to reduce the amount of paperwork required of farmers. [27456]

The Minister for Rural Affairs (Mr. Tim Boswell): As part of the Government's war on waste initiative, we have recently conducted a comprehensive efficiency scrutiny on the burdens of paperwork on farmers. We included three working farmers in our team. The report is with Ministers, and we plan to publish it shortly for consultation.

Mr. Dover: I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for his reply. May I ask him to do two things? First, will he recognise that, with the problems of bovine spongiform encephalopathy and the need for birth dates, sexes and mother-father records, he should ensure that the required amount of paperwork is again reviewed to ensure that a minimum burden is placed upon farmers? Secondly, will my hon. Friend ensure that the officials in the regional offices of his Ministry do not ask for an undue number of returns?

Mr. Boswell: I think that I can give my hon. Friend those assurances. We shall be as helpful as we possibly can and we shall reduce the burdens wherever we can. I am sure that he will appreciate that rules are rules and that we cannot give carte blanche to suspend the rules of payment schemes. We shall, however, be as flexible as possible in our interpretation of them.

Dairy Sector

2. **Sir David Knox:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he will next meet the president of the National Farmers Union to discuss the dairy sector. [27485]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Douglas Hogg): I regularly have meetings with representatives of the agriculture industry, including the president of the National Farmers Union, to discuss issues of importance to them.

Sir David Knox: Has my right hon. and learned Friend had any discussions with Agriculture Ministers in the European Union on the possibility of obtaining modifications to the milk quota regime, including cross-border arrangements?

Mr. Hogg: We have raised the issue on a number of occasions. The concept of transferability, as across the frontiers of member states, is attractive to us and we have pressed for it. At present, the concept has not been accepted by the member states, but we shall continue to press for it.

Mr. Alan Howarth: When the Minister next meets the president of the National Farmers Union, will he place on the agenda the prior options review of research? Will he report to his right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, who I understand is leading the review, the strongly held view of the NFU that it will be deeply damaging to prospects for the horticultural sector if Horticultural Research International, which has done everything that has been asked of it to a very high standard, is to be destabilised, whether through privatisation or withdrawal of public funding?

Mr. Hogg: With regard to the prior options review, I am sure that we are right to ask ourselves several essential questions about the way in which we provide for research, and try to identify the areas of research and the capacities that we need to have directly within the ring fence of the public sector, and those that can be dealt with in some other way, whether by way of privatisation or by contractorisation. Those seem to me to be proper questions to be addressed.

Mr. David Nicholson: I hope that, when my right hon. and learned Friend meets the president of the National Farmers Union, he will pass on the thanks of the Government and of Parliament for the enormous work that the president and his colleagues in the NFU have done to inform and help their many members, who have gone through a nightmarish six weeks with the bovine spongiform encephalopathy difficulty. That nightmare has affected many of their livelihoods and their futures. Will my right hon. and learned Friend and his colleagues ensure that the same quality and detailed information about the present culling process is coming from regional and area offices of the Ministry to the NFU and its members?

Mr. Hogg: My hon. Friend is right when he says that the past eight weeks or so have been a period of great anxiety for the farming community. Farmers throughout the United Kingdom have acted with great responsibility and moderation in circumstances that must have been profoundly distressing to them. That also applies to the NFU and others who represent the industry. They have been extremely responsible and have served their members well. For our part, we are anxious to ensure that

the farming community has all the information it needs, which is one reason why there was a mail shot to every farmer last weekend.

Mr. Tyler: With regard to the dairy herd, can the Minister confirm, as would seem to be the case from his letter to me following our exchanges last week, that contaminated feed appears to be only the main path for BSE infection? What other paths have been identified? Have those been discussed with the NFU, and does the Minister believe that his present cull programme will effectively eradicate them?

Mr. Hogg: If we stand back and ask why we have had as many BSE—infected calves born after the ban as we have, I am sure that the answer lies in contaminated feeding stuffs. There is no doubt that, notwithstanding the ban that was put in place at the end of the 1980s, there was a continuous flow, either in the feed mills or in the farms, of—if I might use jargon rather than be precise—contaminated feedstuffs. That is why we imposed the prohibition in April to prevent the incorporation of any mammalian protein into any feed rations for any farm animal.

Mr. Riddick: Is my right hon. and learned Friend aware that, like beef exports, dairy sector exports have also been hard hit as a result of the BSE scare? This is the third time that I have raised this matter in the past week. If the Government believe that the worldwide ban is illegal, is it not now time for the Government to go out and actively promote the sale of British beef and dairy products to countries outside the European Union?

Mr. Hogg: For these purposes, a distinction has to be drawn between dairy and beef products. We have succeeded in obtaining the lifting of a number of bans in respect of dairy products—for example, in Thailand, Malaysia, Egypt, Peru and Brazil—but we have greater difficulties with regard to beef and beef products because a number of long-standing bans are in place against their export. There are also, of course, many recently imposed national bans. It will be some time before we persuade those third countries to relax their national bans. It would be enormously helpful if the European Union would do that, because that would be an important example to third countries. That is one reason why we place such importance on achieving that objective.

Dr. Strang: When the Minister meets the president of the NFU, will he explain to him why the Government are seeking to deny the House of Commons the opportunity to express its views on a proper motion in the agriculture debate next week? That debate will be of great importance to the dairy sector during the BSE crisis—the biggest crisis to hit our agriculture this century. Why is the Minister ignoring the recommendation of the Select Committee on European Legislation that there should be an early debate in the House rather than in European Standing Committee A? What is he afraid of?

Mr. Hogg: The hon. Gentleman knows that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House will be making his business statement shortly. He will find, from what my right hon. Friend says, that the House will have a full opportunity next week to discuss all the matters about which right hon. and hon. Members are concerned.

Mr. Barry Field: In preparation for his next meeting with the president of the NFU, will my right hon. and learned Friend ask his officials to contact the Isle of Wight branch to listen to its members' worries about animal welfare during the present crisis? The matter was raised with me at a farmers' meeting on Saturday, and again on Tuesday.

I strongly support the NFU's campaign for compulsory listing of ingredients on the labelling of feed when it is supplied to farmers. It is amazing that, after all that has happened during this crisis, farmers can still buy feed without knowing what is in it.

Mr. Hogg: Animal welfare is indeed very important and the Parliamentary Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton (Mrs. Browning), has been active in addressing it. If members of the Isle of Wight branch of the NFU have further points to make, we shall be pleased to hear from them.

I note with interest what my hon. Friend said about labelling.

Animal Slaughter

3. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has for changes in the arrangements for the protection of environmental and public health in connection with the slaughtering of animals. [27457]

Mr. Boswell: We are always prepared to make any appropriate changes to our arrangements which are recommended on the basis of the best scientific advice in the interests of the environment and public health.

Mr. Hughes: It follows from recent announcements by the Minister that in the next few months abattoirs will be called on to deal both with uninfected cattle—as in the normal course of events—and with infected cattle. What steps are being taken to reassure the proprietors of abattoirs and, more important, the public that there can and will be no risk of cross-infection while people are trying to do the difficult job of separating infected from uninfected cattle?

Mr. Boswell: With respect, the hon. Gentleman has not expressed himself precisely. There is no question of infected cattle being treated in that way in abattoirs, because they will be destroyed by incineration. I fully understand the hon. Gentleman's concern, however. We have imposed the most stringent possible controls for the separation of the various types of material: for instance, all specified bovine material is being stained blue and all cattle being slaughtered under the 30-month scheme are being stained yellow. Regular checks and inspections will be carried out to ensure that those controls are followed rigorously and that the different materials are kept separate, and there are signs that abattoirs and the trade are co-operating fully.

Mr. Nicholls: Has my hon. Friend considered the public health implications of the fact that BSE is considerably more rife on the Continent than is currently being admitted? I have already sent that information to my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister. Has my hon. Friend considered whether it is necessary to protect the British public by imposing a ban on products bought from abroad, given that conditions and safeguards abroad are nowhere near as good as ours? Indeed, has he considered imposing a worldwide ban on exports of such products from other European countries?

Mr. Boswell: I note what my hon. Friend has said, and the representations that he has made to my right hon. and learned Friend. The question of a ban would be a matter for the Government's advisers, and no doubt it could appropriately be considered in due course.

Mr. Garrett: Between 1988 and 1991, some 360 BSE-infected carcases were disposed of in a refuse tip in Norfolk. How general was that practice at the time, and what research has been carried out into the risk of leaching of infected matter from open refuse tips?

Mr. Boswell: It is a matter of record that the rules governing the disposal of BSE-infected carcases have been progressively tightened. As I have told the House, a move was made at about that time to complete incineration of those carcases. As for any potential risk caused by carcases going into landfill, I have no evidence from the experts, including those at the Environment Agency, of any danger to the public. That is not surprising, as there is no evidence that the infectious organism persists in the soil.

Lady Olga Maitland: While we are discussing health and safety, does my hon. Friend agree that unfounded scaremongering is downright disgraceful? Will he join me in welcoming the fact that Wimpy is now ignoring that scaremongering and is rightly returning British beef to its menus? We should all go straight into a Wimpy bar this weekend.

Mr. Boswell: I should be delighted to engage in an excursion there in due course; perhaps my hon. Friend would care to join me. Wimpy has commendably recognised the scientific advice that is available to all such burger chains. It is a matter of considerable regret that one or two others, despite the advice that they acknowledge, have not yet seen fit to return to the entirely safe and sensible practice of buying and serving British beef.

Leather Industry

4. **Mr. David Marshall:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to assist hide and skin merchants and their employees who have been adversely affected by the bovine spongiform encephalopathy situation; and if he will make a statement. [27458]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mrs. Angela Browning): The Government have taken a wide range of measures to rebuild consumer confidence and to get the beef market moving again, which will assist all sectors associated with the beef industry. Supplies of hides from the 30-month slaughter scheme are now available to the hide and skin merchants. I hope that that will help the hon. Gentleman who is interested in this subject.

Mr. Marshall: I am grateful for that reply, but I do not think that it deals with the situation. Is the Minister aware of the serious plight that faces companies such as Wescot Hides in my constituency? A ban has been placed on the export of controlled hides arising from the slaughter of cows over 30 months old. What measures does the Minister propose to protect and underpin the value of those hides?

Mrs. Browning: I am aware that the hon. Gentleman is awaiting a reply, which I understand will soon be forthcoming from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland to whom the hon. Gentleman has written about Wescot Hides and the effect on its business. We do not think that hides should be included in the worldwide ban. My right hon. Friend will address that point when he replies to the hon. Gentleman.

Meetings have taken place between industry representatives and officials to arrange for hides to be taken at least to the wet, blue stage, which is the first stage in the tanning process, so that the industry does not lose out on the opportunity for more hides that will now become available in the domestic market.

I realise that the industry has had a difficult time until now because of the short-term shortage, but I hope that what I have outlined will assist the industry and the hon. Gentleman's constituents. The supply that I have mentioned will be available, and we shall do all we can to restore the export market as quickly as possible.

Mr. Viggers: My hon. Friend has been helpful in discussing the allied trade of beef head boning with me. She knows how highly specialised are firms in that trade. They tend to specialise only in that business and they have been wiped out. What plans has my hon. Friend to compensate such firms?

Mrs. Browning: Yesterday I wrote to the solicitors representing the head boning industry who had been to see us. My hon. Friend will be aware that the Government's policy of putting public money into the industry generally has been targeted at restoring the movement of the beef trade from the farm to the abattoirs and slaughterhouses and then to the renderers. It has not been Government policy directly to compensate people who have lost money over this matter, and I regret to tell my hon. Friend that there is no offer of compensation for the head boning industry.

Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy

5. **Mr. Dowd:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he last met farmers' representatives to discuss bovine spongiform encephalopathy. [27459]

Mr. Douglas Hogg: We meet frequently.

Mr. Dowd: In those frequent meetings—I do not know how recent they are—have the farmers' representatives given the Minister any idea that they are now satisfied that the confusion and chaos surrounding the introduction of the 30-month culling programme last week have been overcome? If not, can the Minister give the House an absolute assurance that the programme is now working as it was intended to work? On the broader question of the international ban on beef products, is it not the case that if the Government had acted with dispatch and urgency, when the ban was first imposed by countries such as the United States and Australia, much of the pain, grief and hardship of the past eight weeks could have been avoided?

Mr. Hogg: When I attend the Council, one of the problems I have to face is the fact that the remarks by some Opposition Members are always played back to me. We must not underestimate the ill effects of intemperate language by, for example, the hon. Member for Peckham (Ms Harman). The hon. Gentleman asked about the 30-month slaughter policy. It is picking up and it is important that we get it running fully effectively. I hope that we shall shortly be able to slaughter at the rate of about 25,000 animals a week.

Sir John Cope: Will my right hon. and learned Friend help our farmers' representatives to get across to their continental counterparts the fact that continental Governments' actions and statements during this difficult period have damaged their domestic beef markets more than our Government's statements and actions have damaged the market here? It is important for continental farmers and continental Ministers to realise that fact, because once they do they will have a much greater incentive to lift the beef ban and to take different action. The damage to their markets has been much greater, whereas our Government's actions have helped to protect the domestic beef market here, despite the scaremongering to which my right hon. and learned Friend referred.

Mr. Hogg: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. It is true that beef consumption has fallen further in some member states than here. It is in those member states' interests that the ban should be lifted. The discussion and the argument surrounding the ban, always public at the time of the Agriculture Council and continuously in the newspapers both here and abroad, are not only unjustified, but positively damaging to the interests of member states and their agriculture, so I share my right hon. Friend's views.

Mr. Salmond: What assessment does the Minister make of any Commission recommendation to lift the ban on beef by-products? Would he argue that that is an admission of the principle of the resumption of exports and could be the first step in leading all exports back on to European markets? If that is the position, is he prepared to argue the case for Scotland and Northern Ireland and our quality beef production, a case in which interest has been shown and for which sympathy has been expressed by many European farm Ministers?

Finally, on the subject of loose tongues, will the Minister remind his Back Benchers and those who have been speculating about trade wars that, although the United Kingdom as a whole has a substantial deficit with the rest of Europe, Scotland has a substantial surplus, and that in Scotland—and, I believe, in Northern Ireland—we are more interested in getting our beef back on to European markets than in the internal politics of the Conservative party?

Mr. Hogg: The Commission proposals to relax the ban in relation to gelatine, tallow and semen, are justified by scientific evidence, and I hope that next week's standing veterinary committee meeting will endorse the Commission proposals. It is true that one could proceed step by step thereafter, leading, I hope, to a swift lifting of the ban entirely. In that context, we are considering the concept of establishing certification for mature herds, in terms both exempting them from the 30-month rule here and of constituting another step in the relaxation of the ban. Scotland and perhaps Northern Ireland in particular would benefit from that latter approach, so the scheme would be of particular value both to Scotland and to Northern Ireland.

Sir Jim Spicer: My right hon. and learned Friend will know that the farming community has welcomed the letter he sent it last weekend, but can he give us any indication of when farmers will know when their cattle due for slaughter will be called forward? We are having a late spring, food stocks are appallingly low and farmers are worried stiff that they will have to keep cattle probably for another five or six weeks without knowing what is happening.

Mr. Hogg: It is not within the capacity of MAFF to organise the prioritisation of cattle for slaughter. That can be done only between marts, abattoirs and farmers. The Ministry cannot determine a ranking system for that purpose. What is important, however, is to ensure that the rendering industry is capable of rendering to its maximum capacity as speedily as possible. My hon. Friend the Minister of State has recently had encouraging discussions with the rendering industry, especially yesterday. It is also important that we should try to increase the throughput of the slaughterhouses by providing, for example, cold storage facilities so that carcases which cannot at present be rendered can be taken into cold storage.

Dr. Strang: Will the Minister confirm that it is the Government's objective to eliminate BSE from our cattle? He has made it clear this afternoon that the Government still believe that the cause of that terrible disease is contaminated feed. Has he had an opportunity to consider my request for an investigation into the fact that two thirds of the new cases of BSE are in cattle born after the feed ban, which came into operation eight years ago? Surely there could be great benefit in tracing the cause of those cases. What have we got to lose by trying to find out precisely how those animals came to eat contaminated feed?

Mr. Hogg: I know of the hon. Gentleman's concern, which he has raised with me. I have today signed a letter to him setting out my considered conclusions. I am sorry that he has not yet received it. We are confident that the reason for the disease in calves born after the ban was contaminated feedstuffs. That is why in April we imposed a total prohibition on the incorporation of any mammalian

protein into food rations for any farm animals. By that step I think that we have removed the possibility of, in any sense, contaminated rations being fed to cattle. That is a step change which should lead to a steady eradication of the condition in the British herd.

Mr. John Townend: Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the British public are rapidly losing patience with the Europeans? If they continue to procrastinate over lifting the ban, despite the fact that the Agriculture Commissioner has said that there is nothing wrong with British beef, is not the time rapidly approaching when we should take retaliatory action? Will my right hon. and learned Friend accept that this is a bigger problem in cost and overall effect on this country than when Argentina occupied the Falklands? If we had dilly-dallied then as we are now, the Falklands would still be occupied.

Mr. Hogg: My hon. Friend is entirely right to say that public and political opinion are running out of patience with member states' refusal to lift the ban. That is entirely true. It is something that I impress on Agriculture Ministers whenever I meet them—for example, at the informal Council at the beginning of this week. When my hon. Friend talks about retaliation, I hope that he will ask himself whether whatever retaliation he has in mind would be more or less likely to advance our interests than the present policy of seeking to obtain by persuasion a relaxation of the ban. One should not do anything that would be positively injurious to our interests.

Food Safety

6. **Mr. Khabra:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he last met consumer representatives to discuss Government policy on food safety. [27460]

Mr. Douglas Hogg: Yesterday afternoon.

Mr. Khabra: When the Minister met consumer representatives, did they tell him that there is still no confidence in the safety of British beef, that at least 48 per cent. of slaughterhouses were breaking the BSE controls last September and that 10 slaughterhouses were breaking the rules this March? What has the Minister told those representatives and what confidence has he given to them?

Mr. Hogg: I had the pleasure of meeting representatives of consumer organisations yesterday. I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's assertion that consumer confidence has not been restored; it is recovering. Consumption is moving upwards; some of the figures suggest that it is at about 80 per cent. There is a substantial recovery.

It is true that during the latter part of last year there were examples of non-compliance with the controls in certain slaughterhouses, and that is worrying. That is why I have called in representatives of the industry on a number of separate occasions.

The audits that we have been carrying out recently show an enormous improvement in compliance, which is reflected in the control report that the European Commission made to the Council.

Mr. Nicholas Baker: Will my right hon. and learned Friend encourage, from that Dispatch Box, consumer representatives to ask retailers and restaurants throughout the United Kingdom to stock that safest of products, British beef? To that end, will he also do everything he can to speed up the implementation of the 30-month cull and to increase the flow of information from his Department to the beef industry?

Mr. Hogg: It is probably true that the British beef industry is now the most heavily scrutinised and regulated in Europe, and we can say with absolute confidence that there is no beef industry in Europe with higher standards. As for speeding up the cull and improving the flow of information, again my hon. Friend is right. I am glad to say that the process of slaughtering the cull cows is speeding up, and I hope that about 25,000 will be slaughtered next week. We also need to ensure that the farming community is kept fully aware of all relevant information, and we shall seek to do so.

Mr. Sheerman: Is the Minister not aware that consumer confidence in British beef was destroyed in America, Australia and Europe when the Secretary of State for Health and the Minister of Agriculture, ran into the Chamber to make statements that caused, or precipitated, the crisis in the first place? Then they said that they would do nothing about it. They did not even tell the House what they intended to do until the following Monday. Let us establish the truth: the crisis was brought about by the Government, and they have spent every moment since then blaming everybody else.

Mr. Hogg: Let us analyse that question, if we may, and see what it amounts to: an assertion that the Government should have swept under the carpet and concealed the conclusions and recommendations of the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee. That is a disgraceful suggestion.

Mr. Garnier: Is my right hon. and learned Friend aware that one of the best places to acquire safe British food from British farm animals is Market Harborough cattle market? Will he confirm that E. A. Lane and Sons of Leicester, which is on the list attached to the letter dated 2 May from the Minister of State, is the company that runs Market Harborough cattle market, which is open for business and doing well?

Mr. Hogg: My hon. and learned Friend can be reassured on that point. Another place in which to find very good British beef is the House of Commons Dining Room.

Mrs. Golding: Did the Minister discuss with the consumer representatives the reasons why they are not represented on SEAC, as they are on other Government scientific committees such as the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes, the Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Food and the Committee on Medical Aspects of Food Policy? What would his explanation have been of the reasons why consumers are excluded from SEAC, the Government scientific committee discussing BSE? Does he not think that, if

there had been consumer representatives there, they would have had a better understanding and the public would have been better informed?

Mr. Hogg: I discussed that very question with the Consumers Association, and I told it that SEAC is a specialist committee set up to give the Government specialist advice. It does not seem to me that appointing representatives of groups that do not possess the relevant expertise would assist in the formulation of the specialist advice. If we were to adopt the principle that the hon. Lady commends to me, we should have to follow it further and put representatives of other interest groups on SEAC—producers, renderers, hauliers, retailers and so forth. That would so dilute the nature of SEAC that it would not be able to serve the purposes for which it was established.

Milk Quotas

7. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on milk quotas. [27461]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Tony Baldry): The Commission is planning to present the Council with options for reforming the dairy regime early next year. Meanwhile, we continue to press for an increase in milk quotas and a reduction in support prices.

Mr. Winterton: What plans do the Government have to consult the dairy farming and processing industry with a view to submitting to the European Commission in the very near future proposals relating to future dairy support, particularly relating to milk quotas? That must be done in the next few years. It is vital that we increase quotas for our dairy farmers and make those quotas transferable and more flexible, because this country has the best climate and grass for milk production.

Mr. Baldry: It is a great sadness that this country is not self-sufficient in milk products; that is because of the agricultural policies pursued by the last Labour Government. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have an excellent dairy farming industry and we need to ensure that any reforms of the EC dairy regime play to our strengths and acknowledge the competitiveness of the UK dairy industry. That is why we are pressing for increases in quotas combined with cuts in support prices. That will be good news for UK farmers and for UK consumers.

Mr. Corbett: Is the Minister confident that the impact of the current BSE cull on the dairy industry will not jeopardise the ability of dairy farmers to produce up to the amount of the quota?

Mr. Baldry: We estimate that the of the 30-month cull will reduce milk production by about 1.5 per cent., which can easily be made up by dairy farmers and is roughly equivalent to the super-levy amount this year. There will be no impact on milk production as a consequence of the 30-month scheme.

Mr. John Greenway: Notwithstanding what my hon. Friend the Minister told my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), is it not the case that British milk production is hampered by the quota arrangements? We simply cannot go on producing only 80 to 85 per cent. of our milk requirements. Is not a consequence of that that there is a guarantee that we must import year on year? Is it not time that we had a quota that matched our consumption?

Mr. Baldry: I do not think that anyone disagrees with my hon. Friend. I have explained that the reasons why we are not self-sufficient in milk can be laid firmly at the door of the last Labour Government. We want a reform of the EC dairy regime, an increase in quotas and a cut in support prices, but what we really want is the competitive advantage of the UK dairy industry played to the full. We are determined to achieve that.

Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy

8. **Mr. Barnes:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what further assessment has been made by his Department of the research by Dr. Harash Narang into live tests for BSE; and if he will make a statement. [27462]

Mrs. Browning: MAFF has recently responded positively to a request to collaborate in an assessment of the effectiveness of Dr. Narang's test. The experimental procedure to be used is currently being discussed.

Mr. Barnes: Are not live tests the answer? If they work, we would be able to incinerate the cattle with the disease. The fact that Dr. Harash Narang's work is now being looked at seriously by MAFF is welcome, but why was it blocked for so long? Why was he refused a grant in 1990? Dr. Narang first discovered the filament linked with the brain disease in 1972.

Mrs. Browning: The SEAC has invited Dr. Narang to make available to it his information on CJD, as has MAFF on BSE. He has always declined to make it available. He has also declined to publish his work in a recognised scientific journal. The hon. Gentleman is right; a live test would be very welcome. That is why the Government are co-operating. We are talking to Dr. Narang in the hope that one will be developed quickly.

Mr. Morley: Given the importance of a live test because of its implications for cattle slaughter, we are pleased that the Minister is taking the matter seriously. Will she comment on reports that Dr. Narang is having difficulty getting brain samples from infected cattle to continue development?

Mrs. Browning: The substance that Dr. Narang is asking for is bovine urine. We shall be as co-operative as we can on that.

Common Fisheries Policy

9. **Mr. Steen:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to renegotiate the common fisheries policy; and if he will make a statement. [27463]

Mr. Baldry: I am taking forward a number of sensible initiatives to reform the common fisheries policy.

Mr. Steen: While we realise that my hon. Friend the Minister will do his best to win back the 20 per cent. quota that Spanish flags of convenience have stolen from British fishermen, is he aware that it is not Europe, but his officials, who have closed down an oyster plant in my constituency by gold-plating a European directive about clean water which has been so vociferously and actively pursued that even my local environmental health officer says that MAFF officials are wrong? He has closed down an inshore fishery even though it has for eight years been run as a first-rate fishery.

Madam Speaker: Order. An Adjournment debate is the answer to that one.

Mr. Baldry: The business to which my hon. Friend refers has been closed because of clear advice from the fish diseases laboratory at Weymouth that the purification practice operated by the business posed an unacceptable risk to human health. If he wishes to examine the evidence, I shall be glad to take him through it.

PRIME MINISTER

Engagements

Q1. **Mr. Matthew Banks:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 9 May. [27486]

The Prime Minister (Mr. John Major): This morning, I presided at a meeting of the Cabinet and had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further meetings later today.

Mr. Banks: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government's policies, especially on child benefit, the youth training programme and the lack of a minimum wage, give the youth of this country tremendous opportunities? Does he also agree that, given that it wants to abolish child benefit and the youth training programme and impose a minimum wage, Labour has nothing to offer Britain's youth?

The Prime Minister: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. The Opposition have illustrated the case by their actions over the past few days. Today, they are going to try to retain child benefit for people coming from abroad at precisely the same moment that the shadow Chancellor is trying to abolish it for every family in this country whose child is taking A-levels. Frankly, I find that inexplicable.

Mr. Blair: Does the Prime Minister recall saying that, if the provisional allegations of the district auditor in respect of Westminster city council were confirmed, he would condemn those involved absolutely and unreservedly? The provisional allegations have been confirmed. Will he now condemn those involved unreservedly, as he promised that he would?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is misquoting. Let me make three points. First, both I and my party are in favour of the highest possible standards in public life. I condemn wrongdoing in any quarter.

Secondly—I am surprised that I have to say this to a distinguished lawyer—I believe in justice. As the auditor's report makes clear, the individuals have the right to appeal against the auditor's decision. I understand that they vehemently contest the auditor's report and that they have said that they will take the matter to court. In the face of such a clear-cut protestation of innocence, I think that any sensible and cautious person would be wise to await the outcome before making a judgment.

Thirdly, with the trail of waste, inefficiency and corruption in Labour councils up and down the country, the right hon. Gentleman is in no position to lecture anyone.

Mr. Blair: He said that, if the provisional allegations were confirmed, he would condemn those involved, and now he fails to do so. May I point out that of course they have the right of appeal—for heaven's sake, the Home Secretary is in the appeal courts most days of the week. I also remind the Prime Minister that some of us remember how he stood at the Dispatch Box and condemned the Monklands council of my late right hon. and learned Friend, and predecessor, John Smith in the middle of an inquiry when the allegations were then dispatched.

Does the Prime Minister not recall that the allegations are about putting homeless people into asbestos-ridden flats and appalling bed-and-breakfast accommodation? Will he not take this opportunity to fulfil his promise as Prime Minister and now condemn what any reasonable person would condemn?

The Prime Minister: I am quite prepared to condemn cases of proven malpractice and those who have been found guilty in a court of law. I saw no condemnation from the right hon. Gentleman after Lambeth was found guilty of malpractice. I saw no condemnation when it was thought that between 400 and 500 officers in Lambeth were receiving fraudulent payments. The right hon. Gentleman knows well that the matter must go to the courts. The people challenged in this matter have declared their innocence in very clear-cut terms. I am surprised, in the face of that, that a lawyer would decide before the matter has gone to court to make a judgment about the outcome of that matter. I think that that is a contemptible way for the right hon. Gentleman to behave.

Mr. Blair: I believe that what is contemptible is what we have just heard from the Prime Minister. As for saying that the allegations are not proven, they have been proven—that is precisely what the district auditor has proved under legislation set up by this Government. Is not the Prime Minister's real problem that this was not a maverick group of obscure local councillors, but the flagship Conservative council? They carried on their activities with the knowledge and approval of the Conservative party. If the Prime Minister fails now to condemn what has been described as disgraceful and improper conduct, will it not be crystal clear to the British people that there are no depths to which the Conservative party will not stoop to gain re-election to any office that it holds?

The Prime Minister: I suppose that it was only a matter of time before the Leader of the Opposition tried to widen the smears that his party has been making.

We have learnt that Labour Members take a smear, spread a smear and hope that it will stick. That is what the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues have been doing for the past two or three years.

If the right hon. Gentleman is so pious, will he tell us whether he condemns his colleague, who sits on the Labour Benches, who is a surcharged councillor? Will he tell us why he appointed to his shadow Treasury team someone who encouraged people not to pay the council tax, against the law? Will he tell us whether he agrees with the comments of his deputy leader? He said:

"In a local authority situation you obey the law or not obey the law. We"—

presumably that is the Labour party—

"don't have any firm principles in the Party of how we might deal with the problem."

Against that background and the record of his party and his party's councils, I shall take no charges from him about a matter that must go to court and is not yet proven.

Sir Peter Tapsell: Is my right hon. Friend aware that the great majority of my constituents would wish to mark Europe day by suspending all our net contributions to the European Union—which cost the taxpayers of this country £4 billion last year—until such time as all threats to our historic position as an international trading nation have been withdrawn?

The Prime Minister: I know that my hon. Friend is concerned about the supremacy of British courts, but I must tell him that, if we decided to withhold payments to the European Union, that decision would be struck down in the British courts and not in the European Court of Justice. I must also tell him that, because the net under-payment in the European Union this year will be less than the net payment by this country, there is unlikely to be the draconian effect that some of my hon. Friends anticipate.

I believe that it is right for us to press, in the European Union, for this matter to be speedily resolved. That is what we intend to do, and that is what I intend to press day after day. I want a solution to the problem, not an institutionalising of the problem so that beef farmers suffer longer, or no solution is reached.

Q2. **Mr. Illsley:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 9 May. [27487]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Illsley: Given the Prime Minister's refusal to condemn certain Westminster councillors for their corrupt conduct, will he take this opportunity unreservedly to condemn those Conservative Members who have failed to register their parliamentary incomes of millions of pounds?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman should be aware of what Madam Speaker said about this problem. She said that, if an hon. Member has a complaint about the registration of interests by any hon. Member, he should write to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards and not raise it on the Floor of the House. That is not my view; it is the ruling of the Chair.

Mr. Dover: Does my right hon. Friend remember that the Leader of the Opposition stated that one of the Opposition's few policy decisions was that they would allow homosexuals into the armed services? If it is true that the Opposition are today allowing a free vote on that issue, does not that smack of very poor leadership and lack of direction?

The Prime Minister: That is a matter for the Leader of the Opposition. We will discover the views of every hon. Member later today.

Q3. **Mr. Pike:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 9 May. [27488]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Pike: The Prime Minister will recall that, on 21 February 1991, he said:

"We should be happy to have Dame Shirley's advice".—[*Official Report*, 21 February 1991; Vol. 186, c. 432.]

In view of the condemnation of the six councillors named as guilty in the report that was published today, will he recognise that there was advice from the policy unit at No. 10 Downing street, and from the Department of the Environment, on the turning of a blind eye when Westminster council was committing those illegal and disgraceful acts? When will he condemn those who were guilty? When will heads roll—or will he bite the dust as Prime Minister and fall at the general election before this sordid affair is sorted out?

The Prime Minister: Everything the hon. Gentleman has said is nonsense. Not only is it nonsense, but, as it happens, the quotation he has just given the House is entirely out of context, to make a dishonest point. If he had read the question, hon. Members would know that my reply related specifically to Westminster's success in holding down local taxation. That is in sharp contrast to the performance of Labour councillors. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will now do me the courtesy of reading the quotation and placing an apology and a correction in *Hansard*.

Q4. **Mr. Robert G. Hughes:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 9 May. [27489]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Hughes: On my right hon. Friend's visit to Scotland, will he take with him the message that establishing a Parliament in Scotland, but still allowing Scottish Members of Parliament to vote on English and Welsh matters, would be deeply resented by English and Welsh people and that allowing Scottish Members of Parliament that double set of rights would be gerrymandering on a very large scale?

The Prime Minister: It most certainly would. My hon. Friend highlights a fatal flaw in the Labour party's plans. Labour Members have no idea how they would answer the question first posed by the hon. Member for West Lothian,

now Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell). The position of Scottish Members in this House would be untenable. That is the view once set out clearly by the shadow Foreign Secretary.

The reality is that I cannot imagine that the Labour party has properly thought through or understood what it seeks to do in establishing a tax-raising assembly in Scotland, which would provide a staging post for the leader of the Scottish National party to try to take Scotland out of the Union. I oppose that, although it is not in my party's interest to do so, because it is against the interests of Scotland and against the interests of the United Kingdom. Opposition Members support it because they see it as being in their own party, partisan interest.

Mr. Radice: On Europe day, will the Prime Minister put the case for British membership of the European Union?

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Gentleman cares to read the speech that I made to the Institute of Directors a week or so ago, he will see the case put clearly. I have made it clear from the Dispatch Box time and time again that it is in the interests of this country to be in the European Union, arguing for the sort of European Union that is good for this country. That is my position, it remains my position and it will remain my party's position. What is not my party's position is that, as a result of that, we agree, and slavishly follow, the views of each and every one of our European Union partners. It is not our view that we will "never be isolated" in Europe and will therefore follow the caravan wherever it might lead. If Europe goes in a direction that is not suitable for this country, we shall reject that direction and not follow Europe.

Westminster (District Auditor's Report)

3.32 pm

Mr. Peter Brooke (City of London and Westminster, South) (*by private notice*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will make a statement on the district auditor's report on Westminster city council published today.

The Secretary of State for the Environment (Mr. John Gummer): The appointed auditor for Westminster city council, Mr. John Magill, has today published his findings in relation to the objections to the accounts of Westminster city council, in the form of a "public interest report", made under section 15(3) of the Local Government Finance Act 1982. He has at the same time published a "statement of reasons" on which his decisions are based.

This case is still subject to the due process of law. In these circumstances, it is appropriate for me to inform the House about the auditor's decisions, but not to comment on them. [*Laughter.*] In that, I am following the traditions of the House.

The auditor's decisions are as follows: he has issued a certificate in the sum of £31,677,064 to each of Mr. Graham England, Mr. Peter Hartley, Mr. Paul Hayler, Mr. Bill Phillips, Dame Shirley Porter and Councillor David Weeks, under section 20 of the 1982 Act. They are jointly and severally liable for that amount. He has decided not to uphold the objections in respect of Councillor Judith Warner, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South–West (Mr. Legg) and Mr. Robert Lewis.

The auditor has now issued his certificate. Those surcharged have 28 days from the date they receive the auditor's statement of reasons to appeal against his decision to the High Court. I understand that they intend to do so.

I have made it clear that I would condemn utterly any failure to meet the highest standards of propriety, whenever it is found and whoever is found guilty.

If the decisions in respect of Westminster are upheld by the courts, I shall not hesitate to condemn those responsible as in any similar case, but neither the Government nor the House nor I should prejudge the findings of the courts.

Mr. Brooke: While no subject is higher than the law, will my right hon. Friend confirm, first, that those accused are also subject to the protection of the law until due legal process has been concluded, especially under a somewhat hybrid procedure and when the number of people being investigated has risen as well as fallen during the course of the investigation?

Secondly, although I have never criticised the district auditor—contrary to what has been said by those on the Opposition Front Bench—as the case has now continued for eight years and is not yet concluded, does my right hon. Friend believe that, when it has been concluded, it would be sensible to revisit the procedure because of the strain that it imposes, not only on those investigated and their families but on the district auditor?

Mr. Gummer: I have to say to my right hon. Friend that one of the greatest difficulties in politics is to uphold the integrity of the law while making it clear that, when the law has made its final decision, we must abide by that decision, and that, in all circumstances, however close or distant we may be from those who are condemned, we must condemn them, too. However, that demands of us the reticence of not judging people who still have a case to put. I have not prejudged any case in which Labour councillors have been involved, nor will I until the courts have found. Then I shall join in any rumbustious argument that anyone wants to have.

As to my right hon. Friend's second point, I do not believe that it is right during such a process to comment on the nature of the process or to suggest that perhaps a different process would be better. I have no doubt that people will discuss that afterwards, but this is not the moment to make a decision.

Mr. Frank Dobson (Holborn and St. Pancras): Will the Secretary of State confirm that the procedure being followed by the auditor in this case was laid down by an Act of Parliament passed by the present Government?

Why will he not condemn the Westminster Tory councillors who have been found guilty of using £32 million of public funds to help a Tory election campaign at the expense of homeless families? Why will he not acknowledge that the scandal was not caused by a few maverick councillors in Westminster, but involved the entire Tory party from top to bottom, including people at Tory central office and 10 Downing street?

Does he accept that Tory Members, including—sadly, as far as I am concerned—the right hon. Member for City of London and Westminster, South (Mr. Brooke), the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, the right hon. Member for Westminster, North (Sir J. Wheeler) the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South–West (Mr. Legg) and the Under–Secretary of State for the Environment, the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Sir P. Beresford) were all involved to a greater or lesser extent?

Does the Secretary of State accept that the huge sum of £32 million wasted by those Tories exceeds the annual budgets of no fewer than 272 local councils in England, including places such as Basildon, Milton Keynes, Peterborough, the Wrekin and Plymouth? Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that that sum of money would have built 600 new homes for the homeless or 10 new schools, or would have paid for 1,200 much-needed teachers in the inner cities?

Does the right hon. Gentleman recall that, in the 1980s, he personally helped to rig the Government grant to help Westminster council to keep down its poll tax—or, as the Prime Minister just described it, local taxation? In view of this scandal, the scandal of homeless families being put by the same Westminster councillors into asbestos-ridden blocks, and the scandal of the Government continuing to rig the grants system in Westminster, will the right hon. Gentleman set up a public inquiry into this Tory Government's squalid relations with Tory Westminster over the last 10 years?

Will the Secretary of State take my word for it that, if this cowardly Tory Government will not set up that public inquiry, the incoming Labour Government will do so?

Mr. Gummer: The public will now see how the legal processes would be treated by the Labour party. The public will now understand that Labour will leave nothing unused for party political advantage. Having heard the shameful betrayal of the legal system by the Leader of the Opposition, I was not surprised to hear what was said by the right hon. Gentleman's sidekick and soon-to-be-sacked spokesman on the subject.

One reason that we were given parliamentary privilege was to defend the innocent and to speak up for people who could not otherwise make their case. The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) has used parliamentary privilege to smear a whole series of my right hon. and hon. Friends. He proved that by his use of the words

"to a greater or lesser extent"—

to be able to say afterwards, when those people have been shown not to be guilty of that which the hon. Gentleman claims, that he meant that they were covered by the word "lesser".

The only honourable way to deal with an issue of this kind is to say that, if someone is found by the courts of law to be guilty, one condemns unreservedly and without question—whoever that person is, however close one is to them, and for whatever party they happen to stand. Until that time, every person in Her Majesty's domains has the right to put his case—whether he is rich or poor, elected or unelected.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): Is my right hon. Friend, in resisting commenting on the issue, aware that, if he had not resisted that temptation and condemned the councillors named in the district auditor's provisional report, he would have condemned people who have been exonerated by that report? Is my right hon. Friend further aware that the councillors named in the report took legal advice, and followed it to the letter? Does my right hon. Friend share my belief that people in this country are entitled to be presumed innocent until judged to be guilty?

Mr. Gummer: I think that it is true that Labour Members who jump to condemn on the basis of the interim report must now explain to themselves how it was that they condemned a number of people who are not now under condemnation. It would be good for all of us to be reticent in the way that we approach this report—or the internal report in, for example, Islington, or reports from Hackney or any other boroughs or councils that are, in one way or another, under investigation.

There is no reason for any of us to jump to judgment. What we have to do is to allow the courts to decide and to be clear from the beginning that we will judge everybody equally without fear or favour. That is why I shall make no comment at all about whether people followed the legal advice. That would be to enter the areas that only the courts can, in the end, discuss and decide.

As to my hon. Friend's last point, I suggest simply that the way in which one judges people is whether they stand up for the rights of people they dislike, not whether they stand up for the rights of people they love.

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): Does the Secretary of State acknowledge that, whatever the legal position is in relation to the six who have been surcharged, the position of the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South–West (Mr. Legg) is unlikely to be subject to appeal, and the findings are likely to stand? Those findings, as I understand them, are that the hon. Gentleman knew that gerrymandering was going on and decided not to take any action to ensure that it stopped.

Does the Secretary of State accept that the hon. Gentleman was, in effect, condoning gerrymandering, and that that brings into question his membership of the House? Does the Secretary of State further accept that, if the hon. Member does not resign and the Prime Minister and he himself do not take any action in the matter, they are also condoning gerrymandering?

Mr. Gummer: I say to the hon. Gentleman that I hope that he is never in the position of having to accept the words of someone outside on which he cannot speak for himself. I have no intention of removing from people the right to make their cases and put their positions in whatever legal way they can. I wish that the hon. Gentleman would not fall into his party's usual trap of condemning anybody whether the proof is there or not.

Mr. James Couchman (Gillingham): While I understand my right hon. Friend's reluctance to revisit the process by which this judgment has been made, does he agree that it is a matter for grave concern for one person to act as investigator, prosecutor, judge, jury and hangman, and to have the power to exact an unlimited fine in penalty? Will my right hon. Friend, when this case is finished, revisit this process and consider introducing a much fairer process, which would be in accordance with natural law?

Mr. Gummer: In the origination of this law, which was indeed passed by the House and proposed by the Government, it was clearly envisaged that those affected had the right of appeal to a court. That is what the law expected, and the very nature of the structure and the system must lead any fair-minded person to accept that people should be able to appeal to the courts, and that—until that appeal has been heard and the courts have judged—it is not proper, right or decent to condemn them. *[Interruption.]* The seated interventions of the hon. Member for North–West Durham (Ms Armstrong) show, as usual, an atavistic desire to condemn those with whom she disagrees and a refusal to uphold the principle that people are innocent until proved, in a court, guilty.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Is the Secretary of State aware that, 24 years ago, a Labour council—as opposed to a Tory flagship council—refused as a matter of principle to put up council house rents in line with the Housing Finance Act 1972? The Clay Cross councillors were incessantly condemned for their actions, day in and day out, by Tory Members of Parliament and Ministers in the House.

The councillors appealed against surcharge and—contrary to the way in which the present matter has been handled, with help from the Government for the Westminster councillors—the Clay Cross councillors were put on a fast track. Within two years, the court procedures had been finished and the councillors were condemned and kicked out of government, not because they took any money or did any gerrymandering, but because they acted on principle.

[Mr. Dennis Skinner]

The truth is that there are double standards. There is one set of standards for Labour councillors and another for Tory councillors. Will the right hon. Gentleman withdraw his statements about not coming to judgment? Labour councillors were attacked day in and day out. The right hon. Gentleman is defending Westminster councillors because the Government have connived with them throughout eight years, a period longer than the second world war. The Government are as guilty as the six over at Westminster.

Mr. Gummer: I would condemn anyone of any party, tendency or attitude who broke the law. I condemn the Clay Cross councillors, who were found in a court of law to be guilty. Unlike the hon. Gentleman, who has excused those councillors throughout—he has said that, as they acted on principle, it did not matter if they broke the law, just as the deputy leader of the Labour party says that the Labour party has not made up its mind whether councils should or should not keep the law in such circumstances—I have made up my mind: all councils in all circumstances should obey the law. If they are found guilty, whatever their political views, they should earn the condemnation of the House, and specifically and particularly the condemnation of those who share their political views.

Mr. William Cash (Stafford): Does my right hon. Friend note that my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Mr. Legg) has been exonerated by the inquiry, contrary to some of the disgraceful remarks of Opposition Members? Will he accept that there is something fundamentally unjust and immoral in requiring someone to pay enormous costs without means of redress when he has been exonerated by such a tribunal? Will my right hon. Friend congratulate my hon. Friend on the fact that he has been exonerated?

Mr. Gummer: It is to rush to judgment to say that our hon. Friend does not have recourse in the courts. That will be a matter for him to consider and decide upon. It behoves everyone to be extremely careful in using the privileges of Parliament to pursue party political attacks. There are many people who have been innocent and who have, on both sides of the House, been accused under the privileges of Parliament. They have not been able to answer.

That is why I say to the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) that I can think of a prominent Liberal who was, under the privileges of Parliament, attacked by Labour Members. In many ways, he was destroyed, because he had no way of responding to what others were able to do under parliamentary privilege. It ill behoves the Labour party, which I understood was created in part to defend those who could not defend themselves, to condemn before others have been found guilty.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North–East Derbyshire): The privileges of the House were used to condemn Clay Cross councillors, who had not reached a final position within the courts. They were attacked viciously within the House. The second lot of Clay Cross councillors, after the first lot was debarred, was surcharged severally for £2,000. For that £2,000, the councillors were then debarred from office. They were kept out of office for five years before they could return. I am talking about school caretakers and other such people, not the sort of person who is involved in the Westminster case. It is not unreasonable that we should be interested—

Madam Speaker: Order. I must have a question. I have not heard one yet.

Mr. Barnes: Is it not therefore reasonable that constituents in Clay Cross, people who were hit in that way, should be looking with interest at what has occurred here? If it is said that they are after a pound of flesh, they are not; they are after £31 million-worth of flesh.

Mr. Gummer: The House will have noticed that the hon. Gentleman seemed to suggest—although I hope that he did not—that we should have more concern for the rights of a school caretaker than of someone who happens to be better off. I happen to take the view that the business of equality means that everyone—everyone—is equal before the law, and that we should behave in that way.

I also say to the hon. Gentleman very simply this. I have been prepared to condemn wrongdoing by anyone in any circumstances. I merely remind the House that the Labour party is still claiming that the Clay Cross councillors, who were found guilty in a court, were in fact not guilty, but were acting under the pressure of principle. I hope that the country outside recognises that the Labour party believes that Tories who have not been found guilty must be condemned, but that socialists who have been found guilty must be excused.

Mr. Jacques Arnold (Gravesham): Does my right hon. Friend recall the practice of municipalisation whereby the Labour-controlled Greater London council used millions of pounds of ratepayers' money to purchase houses for Labour voters in marginal Tory wards?

Mr. Gummer: What I may or may not recall is not a matter for today. What is a matter for today is for the House to live up to its reputation of the one place above all others where people can expect to be upheld until they are found guilty.

Mr. John Gunnell (Morley and Leeds, South): As a former member of the Audit Commission, appointed by the present Deputy Prime Minister, I was present when section 15 reports about Liverpool city council and Lambeth council were read. Those reports were acted on. The people paid the surcharge that was due.

Why should that not happen in this case, where a far greater sum is involved, where gerrymandering is involved, which the district auditor, a private sector auditor from Touche Ross, described as disgraceful, and when the district auditor has given an account of how various people on the council thwarted his investigation?

That is why the proceedings have taken so long: people destroyed the papers. Can we not condemn the fact that the people involved delayed the proceedings by destroying the evidence? Is that not a matter that we can condemn, without having to come to a judgment about the judgment that the district auditor has reached?

Mr. Gummer: There is no doubt that, if the courts find that what the district auditor has said is true, those people will be condemned, and they will have to pay the money which is charged. But I say to the hon. Gentleman simply this. I have been in the position, as I am sure he has, of hearing one side of a case and thinking how clearly it points to the innocence or guilt of a particular party. It is only in the next day's newspaper that I read the alternative, and I say to myself, "That's interesting." A final decision can be made only by the court, and I have no doubt that the court will make that decision.

Again, I shall only take lessons from the Opposition when they say unreservedly that, in all circumstances, including the case of the Clay Cross councillors—including the case of a surcharged councillor who sits on their Benches today, including the case of an Opposition Treasury spokesman who asked people not to pay their poll tax, including the case of a deputy leader of the Labour party who said that the Labour party was ambivalent about whether councils should obey the law—they condemn breaking the law. When they do that, they will have some reason to speak.

Mr. Walter Sweeney (Vale of Glamorgan): Given that the district auditor has cleared my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Mr. Legg) of any misconduct, will my right hon. Friend join me in condemning all Opposition Members who, under the cloak of parliamentary privilege, have attacked my hon. Friend and damaged his reputation in the eyes of the public? Will my right hon. Friend urge those Opposition Members to apologise, and to make clear their support for my hon. Friend?

Mr. Gummer: It seems to me that it is for Labour Members to bear it in mind that, in rushing to judgment on the interim report, they have found themselves making a blanket condemnation which turns out to be, at the very least, variable. They should recognise that they need to be reticent today as well.

One of the properties of parliamentary privilege is that it is a privilege, and privileges need to be respected. I think that the public will recognise that Labour Members—including those who have spoken from a sedentary position—do not respect parliamentary privilege as a privilege, but use it as a mechanism for party political advantage.

Mr. John McWilliam (Blaydon): Does the Secretary of State accept from a former commissioner for local authority accounts in Scotland that, if Westminster had been in Scotland, the case would not have dragged on for so long, and there would have been no interim report? There would have been one report, and the Secretary of State would have had a duty to implement it.

Does the right hon. Gentleman also accept that, during the Committee stage of the Bill that became the Local Government Finance Act 1982, the Government opposed amendments tabled by Opposition Members, including me, that would have made it clear that those investigating the matter—the district auditor and his staff—were responsible for producing a report to which the Secretary of State would have had a duty to reply? The Government, however, amended the Bill to provide for an appeal to the court. Would not someone in Scotland who did what is alleged to have been done in Westminster have been surcharged long ago? The Government have weakened the legislation.

Mr. Gummer: I thought it better to be consistent in not discussing whether the process could be improved. I do not think that it would be proper to do that while the matter was being investigated, for obvious reasons.

I cannot claim to be an expert on the details of the Scottish procedures, but I think that most people would agree that, when we are dealing with a clear statement from someone who, in this context, has been able to act as judge and jury, it is not unreasonable for an appeal to take place. That appeal has been granted by the House, and I feel that the House owes it to itself—let alone anyone else—to respect the procedures it has created, and to allow those concerned to proceed to court—with the clear undertaking that, if they are found guilty, they will be condemned by all of us, irrespective of the party to which we belong.

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that Mr. Magill, whose report we are considering, is an accountant, not a lawyer, and that his proper duty was to examine the financial aspects of the case, rather than seeking to make inflammatory statements in judging those involved?

Will he please look into the issue of the inordinate length of the proceedings? That placed appalling pressure on officers and elected members, which led to the suicide of an elected member whose death has been shown to be unnecessary—in the sense that he left a suicide note saying that this matter was the cause of his suicide. Opposition Members are gloating, but we should remember the pressures that these people were under.

Mr. Gummer: The allegations against these individuals are extremely serious. If they are found guilty, they will be guilty of serious misdemeanours. These matters take time, and I am not one of those who immediately rushes to judgment, even on the terms and the time that has been taken by the auditor. It will be for the courts to decide on this matter. However, I agree with my hon. Friend that, in such circumstances, we all ought to pay a little heed to the fact that to attack those who are later found innocent is to undermine our standing with the public in general.

Mr. Clive Betts (Sheffield, Attercliffe): May I take the Secretary of State back to the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) and ask him to reflect on the Government's knowledge and involvement in this matter? First, will he confirm that, throughout the time that Westminster council operated its homes sales policy, each year a housing investment programme statement containing details of that policy would have been submitted to the then Secretary of State and his officials for consideration and consultation? Therefore, the Government knew all about the policy.

Secondly, will he confirm that certain aspects of the designated sales policy would have needed—and, indeed, received—the civic approval of the Secretary of State at the time? Therefore is it not true that Ministers are also up to their ears in this sorry and sordid mess?

Mr. Gummer: I know of no circumstances that would cause a difference between the treatment of Westminster and that of any other council of any other political kind. I notice that the Labour party is busy trying to spread a smear as widely as it can on grounds that are self-evidently nonsense. The hon. Gentleman, with his experience in Sheffield and his dealings there, should be ashamed of himself.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. This matter must now be brought to a close and we must move to our next item of business.

Business of the House

4.6 pm

Mrs. Ann Taylor (Dewsbury): May I ask the Leader of the House for details of future business?

The Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Tony Newton): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 13 MAY—Opposition Day [12th allotted day]. Until about 7 o'clock, there will be a debate on the Northern Ireland economy on a motion in the name of the Ulster Unionists. That will be followed by a debate on the Government's cattle disposal scheme, on a motion in the name of the Liberal Democrats.

TUESDAY 14 MAY—Opposition Day [13th allotted day]. There will be a debate on standards in education, on an Opposition motion. That will be followed by motions relating to the Education (Grants for Nursery Education) (England) Regulations and the Education (Grants for Education Support and Training: Nursery Education) (England) Regulations.

WEDNESDAY 15 MAY—From 9.30 until 10.30 and from 1 o'clock until 2 o'clock, there will be debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House. That will be followed in the afternoon by a debate on the common agricultural policy and other agricultural issues on a motion for the Adjournment of the House. That debate will be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 16 May. Details of the relevant documents will be given in the *Official Report*.

FRIDAY 17 MAY—Debate on education and training of 16 to 19-year-olds, on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

The provisional business for the following week will be as follows:

MONDAY 20 MAY—Remaining stages of the Reserve Forces Bill *[Lords]*.

TUESDAY 21 MAY—Second Reading of the Defamation Bill *[Lords]*, followed by proceedings on the following Bills, which are consolidation measures: the Police Bill *[Lords]*, the Industrial Tribunals Bill *[Lords]*, and the Employment Rights Bill *[Lords]*.

The Chairman of Ways and Means is expected to name opposed private business for consideration at 7 o'clock.

WEDNESDAY 22 MAY—Until 2 o'clock, there will be debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House. That includes the three-hour pre-recess debate with which the House is now familiar.

In the afternoon, until 7 o'clock, debate on developments in the Civil Service. Motion on the Council Tax Limitation (England) (Maximum Amounts) Order. The House may also be asked to consider any Lords messages that may be received.

The House will rise for the spring Adjournment on Wednesday 22 May until Tuesday 4 June.

The House will also wish to know that the following European Standing Committees will meet at 10.30 am on Wednesday 15 May to consider European Community Documents as follows:

European Standing Committee A: There will be a debate on agricultural prices for 1996-97 and supplementary payment to sheep producers in Ireland.

European Standing Committee B: There will be a debate on fraud. Details of the relevant documents will be given in the *Official Report*.

The House may also wish to know that it is proposed that on Wednesday 22 May there will be a debate on transport pricing in European Standing Committee A.

Finally, the House may wish to be reminded that it will rise for the Spring Adjournment on Wednesday 22 May until Tuesday 4 June.

[Wednesday 15 May:

European Standing Committee A—European Community documents: 5215/96, Agricultural Price Proposals 1996-97; unnumbered, Supplementary payment to sheep producers of the island of Ireland. Relevant European Legislation Committee Report: HC 51-xiv (1995-96) and HC 51-xviii (1995-96).

European Standing Committee B—European Community Document: 4512/96, Detection of Fraud and Irregularities. Relevant European Legislation Committee Report: HC 51 xv (1995-96) and HC 51-xviii (1995-96).

Debate on the common agricultural policy and other agricultural issues, on a motion for the Adjournment of the House. Relevant documents: Council Document 5215/96 ADD 1, Volume 1 of 29 February 1996; Council Document 5215/96 ADD 2, Volume ll of 7 March 1996; Council Document 5215/96 ADD 3, Volume 111 of 18 March 1996; Explanatory Memorandum 5215/96 ADD 1 & 2, Volumes 1 & 11 of 12 March 1996; Explanatory Memorandum 5215/96 ADD 3, Volume 111 of 12 March 1996 and the Commons Select Committee Report on Explanatory Memoranda 5215/96 ADD 1, 2 & 3 and Volumes 1, 11 & 111 of 27 March 1996 concerning agricultural prices for 1996/97 and Agriculture in the UK 1995.

Wednesday 22 May:

European Standing Committee A—European Community Document: 5179/96, Transport Pricing. Relevant European Legislation Committee Report: HC 51-xiv (1995-96).]

Mrs. Taylor: The Leader of the House has confirmed that the debate on Wednesday and Thursday on the European Union's common agricultural policy will be on a motion for the Adjournment rather than a substantive motion that could be amended. He must know that there is widespread dissatisfaction, across the Chamber and outside, with the CAP's workings. Surely the turmoil in the Government's party should not be used as an excuse to dodge that issue. What is the justification for making the CAP debate a two-day debate? If the reason is the importance of the issues involved, surely that proves the need for an amendable motion on which the House can vote.

Will the Leader of the House shed any light on what happened in the Committee considering the Wildlife Bill yesterday, when the parliamentary private secretary to the Minister of State, Department of the Environment talked out a Bill supported by the Secretary of State for the Environment? Is there any co-ordination between Ministers in this Administration? Was that incompetence on an alarming scale or an act of premeditated vandalism? What does the Leader of the House intend to do to ensure that that Bill, which has all-party support, makes progress?

On a different issue, the Leader of the House will be aware that it is just over a year since we last discussed the future of Hong Kong. As barely 14 months remain before the handover, would it not be appropriate to have a debate in the near future to provide an opportunity for the House to examine recent developments in Hong Kong, and the Government's proposals for ensuring that the present elected members of the Legislative Council are able to continue in office after 30 June next year?

Finally, in view of the today's report from the district auditor following his eight-year investigation into Westminster city council, which has highlighted the biggest ever scandal in local government, I had intended to ask the Leader of the House whether we could have debate in Government time on what went wrong and on that report.

However, I must tell him and the whole House—I apologise for this unusual step—that, in view of the staggering and sanctimonious complacency of the Secretary of State for the Environment, and the outrageous attitude of the Prime Minister at Question Time in trying to protect and to excuse his political friends, despite the report, the Opposition have now decided to postpone the education debate due on Tuesday. There will instead be a debate in Opposition time on the scandals of Westminster city council.

Mr. Newton: I rarely say this about the hon. Lady, but I thought that the tone and content of the last part of her remarks bordered on the disgraceful. I am astonished that she has joined her right hon. and hon. Friends in seeking to deny people the proper right to take their case to a court, which is what we understand will take place in this instance.

I note what she has said about the debate with somewhat less than complete surprise. It struck me that it was mad for the Labour party to have a debate on education, given the shambles that the shadow Chancellor and others are in about child benefit for 16 to 18-year-olds. No doubt it is as good a reason for getting out of that debate as the hon. Lady has been able to think of.

Returning to my more naturally emollient style, I note the constructive and reasonable request for a debate on Hong Kong, which I shall certainly bear in mind.

On the Wildlife Bill, my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Mr. Banks), together with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and others, have constructively sought to ensure that the Bill is workable and consistent with our and the Nature Conservancy Council's efforts to build constructive relationships with landowners and land managers, and we shall continue to approach it in that spirit. It has not been talked out. It will continue in Committee, and I hope that that constructive process will go on.

The hon. Lady asked about the agriculture debate. I do not think that I can add much to what I said in my response to her last week and wrote in my letter to the Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee, who, I am glad to say, has responded with a thoughtful and constructive letter saying that it would be helpful for the documents that have been referred for debate to be tagged on the Order Paper on the motion for the Adjournment of the House—a request to which I have responded in my statement today.

[Mr. Newton]

If the hon. Lady wants to know why we have decided to extend the debate to two days, I must tell her that it is a confirmation of what I said last week, when I indicated that there was wide-ranging interest in agricultural issues, going well beyond CAP price fixing. I have received a significant number of requests, especially from my hon. Friends, asking for a two-day debate, and I thought it right to respond.

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): Can we have a debate on Government policy relating to the electricity industry, and can we be told why the Government have overruled a merger between Midlands Electricity and PowerGen, in spite of the recommendation to the contrary from the Monopolies and Mergers Commission? Will the Government take the opportunity of setting out in the House their policy towards electricity and such mergers, so that everyone knows exactly where they stand?

Mr. Newton: My right hon. Friend will no doubt be aware that my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade is due to be in the House answering questions next Wednesday. I will ensure that he is aware of my right hon. Friend's point before he gets here.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): May I return to the debate on the common agricultural policy? I welcome the fact that we now have an extra day in which to discuss these important and wide-ranging subjects. However, it seems highly unsatisfactory that the Government have not acceded to the House's request—there are views about this on both sides of the House—that it would be much more comfortable to have an amendable motion, as we have always had in the past. The Leader of the House has not persuaded me that there are circumstances which mean that we should change the convention on this occasion.

Mr. Newton: The fact that I have not convinced the hon. Gentleman does not mean that I am wrong and he is right. In fact, I think that I am right and he is wrong. As well as the debate in the House, there is a full scrutiny debate in Standing Committee, with the opportunity to cross-question Ministers for an hour. That is a significant advantage of that process, and I think that many hon. Members agree with me.

With those two debates, we are providing nearly two and a half days for the debating of agricultural matters, instead of either half a day in Committee or a full day in the House. Any hon. Member can attend and speak in the Standing Committee debate. That is the sensible way to proceed.

Sir Jim Spicer (West Dorset): Does my right hon. Friend accept that most hon. Members will welcome the addition of another day for the agriculture debate? He clearly said that the debate could be wide-ranging; will he make it absolutely clear that, in view of the gravity of the bovine spongiform encephalopathy situation, and of the concern felt by all our farming communities, there will be no bar to extending the debate to domestic matters such as BSE and the progress that is being made?

Mr. Newton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for confirming that there is a widespread interest in such matters at this time. Precisely for that reason, the debate is listed as being

"on the common agricultural policy and other agricultural issues".

It could not be wider-ranging than that.

Mr. Tony Banks (Newham, North–West): Not many people know this, but the 12-starred badge that I am wearing in my lapel for Europe day is not the flag of the European Union but the flag of the Council of Europe, which has somehow been expropriated by the EU. That notwithstanding, could we have a debate on how to deal with Europe day in future? Does the right hon. Gentleman remember when we used to celebrate Empire day in school, and get dressed up in various costumes? Why do we not now celebrate Europe day in schools—or, if we cannot do that, why not have a public holiday? Perhaps we could change the anthem to "Ode to Joy". I am sure that that would please many Members of Parliament.

Mr. Newton: I am beginning to think that, although he does not look it, the hon. Gentleman must be older than I am, because I do not have those memories. As for me, I have felt it most appropriate to wear today what I might call the flag of the British Red Cross Society, and I am proud to do so.

Mr. James Pawsey (Rugby and Kenilworth): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that two days next week will be devoted to debating the common agricultural policy, and does he believe that two days will be long enough for Labour Members to put right all the damage they have done to the British beef industry in the past two months?

Mr. Newton: I agree with my hon. Friend that that would take rather longer than two days, but I hope that we shall at least hear them acknowledge the damage done by the initial responses of the hon. Member for Peckham (Ms Harman).

Ms Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): I am sure that the Leader of the House is aware that the one voice lacking in the exchanges about the scandalous behaviour of Westminster council is that of the thousands of people whose lives the council's gerrymandering tactics have destroyed—not least a family in my constituency who were bribed out of their tenancy by Westminster council and put on an estate outside London. The council subsidised their rent there by more than £100 a week, but because of racial harassment the family had to leave the estate, the family broke up and Westminster refused to house them, so they are now in bed-and-breakfast accommodation. Grave damage has been done to that family.

I cannot believe that the Leader of the House would really criticise the shadow Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Mrs. Taylor) for using one of the Opposition days to debate the issue. Indeed, does it not behove the Government to add an extra day to that debate, so that we can really examine in detail over two days the gross damage that that gerrymandering has wreaked on so many people's lives?

Mr. Newton: The hon. Lady would not expect me to add to what my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for the Environment and the Prime Minister have said within the past hour or so, and I shall not attempt to do so; nor do I wish to subtract from what I said about the words of the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Mrs. Taylor).

Mr. Harry Greenway (Ealing, North): May I ask for a debate next week on the serious anger of many of my constituents at the corrupt action of a Labour councillor who sought to insist in a letter to the chairman of housing that he put Labour voters into a ward in my constituency for the specific purpose of securing Labour's majority in that ward? Have we not heard a great deal of humbug from the Labour and Liberal parties today, and would it not be better if Labour Members examined what their own party is doing, which they have not condemned in Ealing?

Mr. Newton: I am somewhat inclined to agree that we have heard a great deal of humbug, and perhaps worse, but my hon. Friend may accept that, in the spirit of what I have said in the past few minutes, and of what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment said earlier, I would not want to make further specific comment on specific cases.

Mr. Nigel Spearing (Newham, South): Will the Leader of the House confirm that the whole of Thursday's business will be on agriculture, and that the debate will not last only until 7 o'clock? Will the debate therefore last for two whole days, and not a day and a half?

Mr. Newton *indicated assent.*

Mr. Spearing: I see that the right hon. Gentleman nods. Is there not an anomaly in having about 12 hours of debate on agriculture without an amendable motion, as distinct from having just two and a half hours in Standing Committee, where an amendable motion could be moved? Could not that motion then be taken on the Floor forthwith? Can the right hon. Gentleman not combine the two? If not, he might be accused of not giving the House a good crack at the issue.

Mr. Newton: I hardly think that devoting two and a half days to the subject—two on the Floor and half a day in Standing Committee—can be described as not giving Members a fair crack of the whip.

Mr. Spearing: I was referring to an amendable motion.

Mr. Newton: I heard what the hon. Gentleman said. I repeat what I said last week. I believe that our procedures for Standing Committees—which we use for the overwhelming majority of scrutiny these days—are more effectively geared for the kind of scrutiny necessary for such a matter. Members can question the Minister for an hour, and the matter can then be debated for an hour and a half, with any Member able to take part. It is sensible to have both procedures on this occasion, and that is what I have provided for.

Mr. Tony Marlow (Northampton, North): My right hon. Friend will be aware that agriculture policy is largely a matter for our masters in Brussels, and is to a much lesser extent a matter for this House. Is he aware that many of his right hon. and hon. Friends may vote on Thursday to pass judgment on our masters in Brussels, rather than on the Government's agriculture policies? In that case, it is possible that the House may vote not to adjourn. What would be the implications for the Government's business and policies of such a result?

Mr. Newton: Such a result would simply mean that the half-hour Adjournment debate would not take place.

Ms Janet Anderson (Rossendale and Darwen): May I draw the attention of the Leader of the House to early-day motion 855 in the name of myself and my hon. Friends, which refers to the thousands of people whose lives are blighted every year by stalking?

[*That this House notes that thousands of people's lives are blighted by stalking each year, and that there is currently no effective method for either the police or victim to combat this social menace; recognises there is massive public support for the introduction of a criminal offence of stalking; commends the Daily Mirror for its campaign calling for such an offence; considers that such an important issue of public safety should be above party politics; believes that the Stalking Bill merits the close scrutiny and consideration of a Standing Committee; and hopes it will receive an unopposed Second Reading on Friday 10th May.*]

Does he agree that there is a demand for the introduction of a criminal offence of stalking? Will he assure me that the Government will not obstruct the Second Reading of my Stalking Bill tomorrow? Will he join me in congratulating the *Daily Mirror* on its excellent campaign in support of my Bill?

Mr. Newton: I, and indeed the Government, very much understand and sympathise with what the hon. Lady is trying to achieve with her Bill, and we will certainly consider its merits against that background. We are examining what new measures might be introduced to combat stalking.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cirencester and Tewkesbury): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the largest industries in my constituency are agriculture and associated activities? He will be aware that those industries are facing their biggest crisis since the war, and many employees do not know what their future will be. I warmly welcome the fact that we will have a two-day debate, which the subject justly deserves.

Irrespective of the present crisis, the reform of the CAP is vital to every person in this country. Will my right hon. Friend note that the official Opposition wanted to curtail debate on this important subject? During that debate, I hope that the Opposition will do their best to restore the reputation of British agriculture, and stress the fact that our beef is the safest in the world to eat.

Mr. Newton: I endorse the latter part of my hon. Friend's comments, and I am grateful for his support for the course that I have adopted.

Mr. George Foulkes (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley): Those of us who represent large rural constituencies—and, I believe, Opposition Front Benchers—welcome the fact that we will have a two-day debate. The debate will give us an opportunity to get rid of the crazy notion that my hon. Friend the Member for Peckham (Ms Harman) caused the BSE crisis—it was the dithering incompetence of the Government that caused it.

I have been here for 17 years last Friday, and I think that, on almost every occasion on which we have discussed agricultural prices, there has been a vote.

[Mr. George Foulkes]

The hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) and my hon. Friends the Members for Dewsbury (Mrs. Taylor) and for Newham, South (Mr. Spearing)—and now myself—have told the Leader of the House that we should have a vote next week. Will he change his mind, as he is heavily outnumbered on the matter? Is he afraid to do so because, last December, the Government lost a vote on the common fisheries policy?

Mr. Newton: The hon. Gentleman may have been here for 17 years, but I have been here for 22, and in many matters, the ways in which the House scrutinises things have moved on to reflect new circumstances. Indeed, when he and I first came to the House, the European Standing Committees that do most of the detailed scrutiny did not exist.

Mr. Jacques Arnold (Gravesham): Could we have a debate next week on far left infiltration of local institutions, so that we could highlight the fact that a Labour councillor in my constituency has resigned from the Labour party on grounds of extreme left-wing activity? A Labour councillor in West Suffolk has done likewise, and joined the Conservative party. Both councillors joined the Labour party believing all the moderate twaddle of new Labour, only to discover the reality: that Labour is still very left-wing in the constituencies—*[Interruption.]*—and, as we know, in the House.

Mr. Newton: As my hon. Friend may have noticed, he has put new heart into Labour Members below the Gangway.

Miss Kate Hoey (Vauxhall): Will the Leader of the House arrange a debate next week in which the Minister responsible for sport could give his views on the chaotic situation at the Football Association in respect of ticket distribution for the Euro 96 championships? In view of the short time before Euro 96 and the increasing dissatisfaction of football supporters throughout England, will he ensure that we debate this important topic, so that we can be sure that England's name will be strengthened—and not weakened by chaos at the FA?

Mr. Newton: My hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department of National Heritage will be one of the Heritage Ministers who will answer questions on Monday 20 May, and I will warn him of possible questions. I understand that the Football Association is making every effort to ensure that safety and security at Euro 96 are not compromised by tickets falling into the wrong hands, and the Government are giving it every support.

Dr. Robert Spink (Castle Point): Could my right hon. Friend find time for an early debate to ensure that the fishing industry, especially the controls on it and sea fish conservation, is properly regulated? We must ensure that the small inshore fleet and the traditional boats are properly and appropriately controlled when compared with the deep-sea boats of producer organisations and rule beaters that seem to do so well. As an Essex Member, he knows that the small inshore fleet is one of the features of the Essex fishing industry.

Mr. Newton: Indeed. Although I have a landlocked constituency, I was born and brought up in the Essex port of Harwich, so I am well aware of what my hon. Friend said. I shall bring his remarks to the attention of my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister of Agriculture.

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): Will the Leader of the House arrange a debate on the issues raised by last night's "Dispatches" programme on the running of Motability? Can I have an assurance that the whole House—or at the very least, the Public Accounts Committee—will have an opportunity to debate those issues, and especially these four very serious allegations: first, the take-over of a public charity by a private for-profit, consortium of high street banks; secondly, the siphoning off of more than £100 million that belonged to disabled people, to boost the private consortium's profits; thirdly, the extent to which the charity exists behind a cloak of secrecy that the Government have consistently refused to question and bring before the House; and fourthly, the links between direct benefactors and donors to the Conservative party and the running of the Motability Finance Ltd. scheme? That must be addressed under the scrutiny of the House as a whole.

Mr. Newton: I did not see the "Dispatches" programme, but obviously I am interested in the hon. Gentleman's comments, as a former Minister for disabled people and as one who has supported the Motability arrangements over the years. The hon. Gentleman will understand if I do not feel able to comment on what he has said, but I shall bring his remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security.

Mr. John Marshall (Hendon, South): Will my right hon. Friend arrange for an early debate on the national health service, so that I may welcome the further reduction in long-term waiting lists which were published today? Is he aware that the number of people awaiting surgery for more than 12 months has been reduced from more than 200,000 six years ago to only 4,400? Will he also confirm that there has been a 25 per cent. increase in the number of patients treated since the reforms were introduced, and that GP fundholders have revolutionised general practice?

Mr. Newton: I shall certainly look as sympathetically as I can upon my hon. Friend's request, bearing in mind the pressures on the House's time. I welcome the opportunity that he has in any case had to draw attention to those very welcome and encouraging figures.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): When can we have a debate about road safety, so that we may congratulate the Government on their courage in introducing probably the most effective advertisements on road safety ever to be used? They comprise home videos depicting children who have been the victims of fatal road accidents and are accompanied by a very moving, simple message from the works of Auden. As those advertisements are likely to get through to those who have caused road accidents when other advertisements have not, is it not right that we should congratulate the Government and all those responsible on drawing attention to the dreadful road toll of 10 fatal accidents every day of the year?

Mr. Newton: For once, I am left almost speechless, as I cannot remember the hon. Gentleman's asking a helpful question ever before. I shall simply take his comments in the spirit in which they are offered, and thank him most warmly.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North–East Derbyshire): My hon. Friend the Member for Newham, South (Mr. Spearing) offered a sensible suggestion as to how we could vote on substantive matters next Thursday. The matters will be discussed in European Standing Committee A on Wednesday, when a motion will be put in front of us, presumably with an Opposition amendment. When the matters are decided, they could be brought before the House—certainly the Government motion must be brought back to the House—and voted upon immediately. We could vote on the motion in the House after 10 o'clock on Thursday, and then on the amendment if necessary.

Mr. Newton: The hon. Gentleman is a member of the Scrutiny Committee, and I have referred briefly to the constructive and thoughtful letter that I received from its Chairman. The hon. Gentleman's suggestion does not strike me immediately as particularly attractive, but I have no doubt that it was intended in a constructive spirit.

Points of Order

4.37 pm

Mr. Jeff Rooker (Birmingham, Perry Barr): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. In the past few days, hon. Members will have seen reports in the press that a journalist who works in the precincts of Westminster has been banned for 20 working days. Can you give us any useful background information regarding that matter?

Madam Speaker: I am sure that the whole House agrees that the press are an important element in the preservation of democratic freedoms, that their presence in the Palace of Westminster is welcome, and that they have the right to report our proceedings and to comment on political developments as they choose. Members of the Lobby are granted privileged access to Parliament so that they may exercise that right most effectively. But privilege is accompanied by responsibility. That responsibility includes a duty to take the advice of the security authorities of the House in relevant cases.

On 28 April, *The People* printed an article by its political editor about a current security threat. The article contained information which, unusually, he had been asked specifically by the security authorities not to publish. This is not the first time that the political editor of *The People* has published material that increases the security risk to Members and to their staff. He was previously given a warning about his activities here.

I have given very careful consideration to this entire matter. My conclusion is that the political editor's Lobby pass should be suspended for a period of 20 sitting days.

Sir David Steel (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): As I was the hon. Member involved in that story, if the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Rooker) or anyone else is concerned about it, I shall be happy to provide further information in private.

Madam Speaker: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark and Bermondsey): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Arising out of the exchanges at Prime Minister's Question Time and in answer to the private notice question about Westminster, can you provide guidance on what hon. Members can do when it is clear—at least to me, and I am sure to many other hon. Members—that the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for the Environment, either intentionally or unintentionally, misled the House about the law in relation to the district auditor's findings?

The report is available to hon. Members and makes it clear that the auditor announced his findings today, which were not provisional—they were decisions. He made three decisions that there had been unlawful behaviour, and he came to the conclusion that six people were guilty—his words—of wilful misconduct.

The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State either misled the House, were economical with the truth or were ill-informed, and clearly were advised in an extraordinary manner. There must be a way to get Government officials to state accurately the law when the law is absolutely clear.

Madam Speaker: There may well be an opportunity for the hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members who wish to pursue that line of argument in the debate that is planned for next week. That debate will no doubt provide an opportunity for all those matters to be examined.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Speaker: With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 101(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

COAL INDUSTRY

That the draft Redundant Mineworkers (Payments Schemes) (Amendment and Consolidation) Order 1996, which was laid before this House on 8th March, be approved.

NORTHERN IRELAND

That the draft Proceeds of Crime (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, which was laid before this House on 16th April, be approved.

INTERNATIONAL IMMUNITIES AND PRIVILEGES

That the draft International Oil Pollution Compensation Fund 1992 (Immunities and Privileges) Order 1996, which was laid before this House on 17th April, be approved.—*[Mr. Ottaway.]*

Question agreed to.

DEREGULATION

Madam Speaker: With the leave of the House, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 14A (Consideration of draft deregulation orders),

MOTOR VEHICLES TESTS

That the draft Deregulation (Motor Vehicles Tests) Order 1996, which was laid before this House on 1st April, be approved.

PARKING EQUIPMENT

That the draft Deregulation (Parking Equipment) Order 1996, which was laid before this House on 1st April, be approved.—*[Mr. Ottaway.]*

Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 102(9) (European Standing Committees),

NATURAL MINERAL WATERS

That this House takes note of European Community Document No. 12712/95, relating to natural mineral waters, and supports the Government's opposition to those parts of this proposal which impose unnecessary new requirements on producers of 'spring waters'.—*[Mr. Ottaway.]*

Question agreed to.

ARMED FORCES BILL [*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Resolved,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Armed Forces Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any sums required by the Secretary of State for making grants towards expenditure in connection with the repair or maintenance of—

(a) the land and buildings on the site known as the Royal Naval College; or

(b) any object of historical interest situated on that land or in those buildings.—*[Mr. Soames.]*

Orders of the Day

Armed Forces Bill

As amended in the Select Committee, considered in Committee.

[MR. MICHAEL MORRIS *in the Chair*]

Ordered,

That the recommitted Bill be considered in the following Order, namely, Clauses 1 to 4; New Clause 5; New Schedule 1; Clauses 5 to 7; Schedule 1; Clause 8; Schedule 2; Clause 9; New Clause 3; Clause 10; Schedule 3; Clauses 11 to 13; Schedule 4; Clauses 14 to 27; New Clause 4; Clauses 28 to 31; Schedules 5 and 6; Clause 32; remaining New Clauses, other than New Clause 1; remaining New Schedules; New Clause 1.—[*Mr. Ottaway.*]

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2

ENLISTMENT OR ENTRY FOR LOCAL SERVICE

4.42 pm

Mr. Bruce George (Walsall, South): I beg to move amendment No. 81, in page 2, line 10, at end insert

'Provided that no regulations shall be made under paragraphs (j) and (k) above until a full report on the consultative process and pilot studies relating to the Ministry of Defence police has been made to the House.'.

I move this amendment with some reluctance because I was hoping that the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill would agree with my general attitude on the future of the Ministry of Defence police, which the clause addresses. If implemented, the clause would cause considerable damage to that fine organisation. Unfortunately, the Committee—with the casting vote of an excellent Chairman, who had this one lapse—did not agree. Because the voting was five to five, and the Chairman's vote consigned the amendment not to the clause but to the relevant part of the report, I thought that I should give the House an opportunity to consider the two views on the matter—which are not and should not be party political—and to discuss clause 2 and what it entails, particularly for the MOD police.

The MOD police is a non-Home Department police force that has served with great distinction for many years. My intention is not to try to wreck the concept, but merely to give the House an opportunity to consider in more detail what the MOD has in mind for the future of the MOD police. As we all know, the clause is intended to set up a new organisation, which will clearly have a detrimental effect on existing organisations. I repeat that my amendment is intended not to wreck anything but to give the House an opportunity to debate what the MOD is still in the process of doing—undertaking a series of consultations on the future of defence organisations and defence concepts. If my amendment secures sufficient support, I hope that the MOD will pause and give some thought to those matters.

No monopoly on wisdom is held by any individual or political party anywhere in relation to security policy. In relation to defence, which is the responsibility of the MOD, clearly the right decisions have to be made. Unfortunately, over the years other members of the Select Committee on Defence and myself have reached the conclusion that the MOD does not always get things right on policing and security.

The Defence Committee was largely responsible for stopping the privatisation of security at the royal ordnance factories when they were taken out of Government control in the early 1980s. Later, that Committee played an enormous part in ensuring that, when British Aerospace took over the royal ordnance factories, it took with it the MOD police. The Committee produced a very critical report on the MOD Deal barracks bombing, and it is currently in the midst of another evaluation of a substantial change being considered by the MOD.

The Defence Committee is still examining the report produced by the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill, of which I was a member. Unfortunately, the MOD police and security have been subject to almost constant examination. I recall the Broadbent report in 1984, the "Guarding of Defence Installations" report in 1989, the Blelloch inquiries and the Rucker report—some of which was made public. There have been investigations on several occasions by the inspectorate of constabulary, and internal inquiries. I fear that the MOD is getting it wrong again, and I want to give it time more seriously to consider what could be a precipitate decision.

If the MOD police were reduced to 2,500 in number—an almost inevitable consequence of the process of change that is being undertaken by the MOD, which will certainly be accelerated should clause 2 be passed—I fear that it would be extremely traumatic. If that happened, morale would sink very low and many of the best MOD police officers would leave, taking advantage of the compulsory redundancy terms on offer. For some years, the quality of the MOD police is likely to be impaired, but it would eventually recover.

Sir Jim Lester (Broxtowe): In terms of the morale of the MOD police, I know that the hon. Gentleman knows that Chilwell and Chetwynd barracks are carved into my heart. I find that it will be the pilot scheme for this change. It will happen by April 1997—less than a year. There is considerable concern among the MOD police on the site in my constituency and among the local population, who feel that soldiers parading the fences around the depot would not have the same force as policemen, who have the power to intervene with all sorts of people in cases of burglary, car theft or whatever. So I am listening carefully to what my colleague is saying. I should say to my hon. Friend the Minister that it will be difficult for me to vote against the amendment.

Mr. George: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. His comments reinforce the point that I have sought to make over the years, that security should never be seen as a party political issue. The fact that members of the Defence Committee agree with much of what I say suggests that the Government should proceed with considerable caution.

My amendment of the text of the Select Committee report was intended to say, "Look, the MOD is making a series of inquiries into the future of policing and security. Please do not take any major decisions until that inquiry has been completed, evaluated and passed on to the House and its Defence Committee for evaluation." Surely there is nothing too dramatic about that. Nothing should be done until the Defence Committee has completed its overall examination based on the evidence that has been given to us and the forthcoming visit by the Minister, to which we are all looking forward, and reported. Nothing

[Mr. George]

should be done until the pilot studies to which the hon. Member for Broxtowe (Sir J. Lester) referred have been evaluated—I suggest that they should be evaluated independently as well as by the MOD. Only when all those legitimate conditions have been fulfilled should the Ministry of Defence proceed to make the changes that it appears hellbent on making.

It is my considered judgment that the MOD already has a mix of policing and security forces, from which it can draw to meet any future requirements, without recourse to the establishment of yet another organisation. There is surely a super-abundance of security and policing organisations. As yet, no justification has been given for creating one more.

Military home service engagement is a spurious concept that has not been properly explained. Nor has it secured the support of the House of Commons. It is in my view a further attempt to get at the MOD police because it is perceived that costs are too high. I say that security must not be tampered with and that the ultimate criterion by which we evaluate good policing and security is its success in catching adversaries, criminals and fraudsters and deterring potential ones. One should not be profligate, but surely one should not drive down costs to such a level that the organisation's future is in jeopardy.

I presume that, if the scheme goes ahead, soldiers recruited will be given redundancy payments and then re-employed. That is a distinct possibility. They will serve according to different conditions of service from those under which they serve in the armed forces.

We are several thousand soldiers short at present. The Navy and the Air Force want nothing to do with the scheme. It is hard to keep soldiers in the Army and to attract more soldiers to join the armed forces. Soldiers are now given a bounty if they can recruit a mate. If we cannot keep soldiers in the Army at existing pay rates, how are we to entice them in with lower pay, no overtime, no benefits and lower status? They will not have access to free housing or a housing allowance. I wonder how these men and, I presume, women are to be recruited. They will be expected to serve Queen and country, yet this bizarre little organisation is being set up, which requires men and women to serve only in a limited area.

All of us who watch the Napoleonic wars being fought out weekly on the television are familiar with the old redcoat song, "Over the hills and far away." If the clause is accepted tonight, the song will need a slight amendment. It will go:

"Queen Anne commands and we'll obey
Over the hills and as far as Wolverhampton."

People recruited in the west midlands will be required to serve Queen or King and country only within the travel-to-work area. It seems to me that it will be rather difficult to motivate people in those circumstances. Whatever the Minister says, it will be a second-class, inferior Army. That will make it even more difficult to recruit.

The MOD tested opinion among a few hundred soldiers and asked whether they would like to serve in some future guarding force. Twenty-five per cent. said that they would be interested, but they were not told what the wages would be, that they would not be allowed to work overtime or that they would not receive a housing allowance. So that little survey was spurious.

The Ministry of Defence police are being attacked and attacked fundamentally. Will the Minister tell us what will be the administration costs of the new guarding force? Will he tell us what witnesses were not able to tell either the Defence Committee or the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill how much it is all going to cost? The Defence Committee was told that it would cost some £42,000 to make a MOD policeman redundant. That figure went up a few months later to £85,000.

Then the Government said that it would take between seven and 11 years to reach break-even point. In other words, all this disruption to the MOD police and the guarding and policing of our soldiers, sailors, airmen and their families will not even pay off financially for between seven and 11 years. If my experience of MOD statistics is anything to go by, it will be even longer before there will be any achievement of profit, if that is the criterion.

It is estimated that the number of MOD police, which was 5,000 a few years ago, will be driven down to perhaps between 2,600 and 3,000—a cut of between 40 and 50 per cent. That will surely have an adverse effect on morale. The MOD police perform their tasks well. Will a force the size of which has been driven down by between 40 and 50 per cent. realise its functions of guarding, exercising constabulary powers, fulfilling its role in transition to war, fraud detection—of increasing importance—dealing with emergencies and assisting Home Office forces?

The future of policing within the MOD is threatened by what the Government intend to do. The Government must prove to us that the cost saving will be worth all the disruption. We shall have to have more information about whether the Treasury will fund the cost of the change. I suspect that, in a couple of years, any financial assistance from the Treasury will be withdrawn and that all the costs will fall on the MOD.

Therefore, I urge both sides of the Committee to join me in asking the Ministry of Defence not to proceed so quickly, as there are critical decisions to be made. The Ministry of Defence has embarked on at least three consultative exercises. It should conclude them before consulting the Defence Committee, not so that we can exercise our veto, but to discuss security and policing.

Although pilot studies are under way, the Government should make no further reductions beyond those proposed and those already achieved through redundancies. Only if the proposed changes are successful, valid and necessary in the exceedingly dangerous world in which we live, and only if the Government can prove that to the organisation concerned, the House and the Defence Committee, should those substantial changes be made.

If I receive assurances that there will be no major further changes, I shall be delighted not to divide the Committee, but if I do not receive those assurances, I shall seek the support of hon. Members on both sides of the Committee in forcing the amendment to a vote.

5 pm

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): It is now more than a decade since the hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George) and I served on the Ministry of Defence Police Bill. We have followed the security interests of the Ministry of Defence police and all the other police and security forces in the Army, the Navy and the Air Force

since then. It is important that hon. Members are aware that there is support on both sides of the Committee for much of what the hon. Gentleman has said.

The Ministry of Defence police must be the most reviewed police force ever. There is real anger among Ministry of Defence policemen, not just in my constituency, where I met the Ministry of Defence police from Land Command only 10 days ago, and had an extremely fruitful discussion. Part of the trouble was that they did not know what was happening, although it would affect their numbers, and their lives and careers and those of their families.

The hon. Gentleman will understand that I shall be unable to support him if he seeks to divide the Committee, for reasons that I explained to the Select Committee. In addition, I believe that there is merit in the proposal for local service engagement, which I would not wish to prevent. I am glad that it has been recommended that the Defence Committee should review the matter, so that we can press the Minister and his officials on future security arrangements.

We should bear it in mind, however, that the agencies now established in the Ministry of Defence pay for their own security. There is downward financial pressure on them, so they seek to achieve the best possible use of the most appropriate policing techniques. That might well involve more use of soldiers or service men and women as well as new security arrangements, in addition to the guard force.

I continue to be concerned by the interface with the Home Office police. In areas of military concentration such as my constituency—as well as in Colchester and other places—there are real issues to be addressed. It is assumed that if there is a reduction in the numbers of Ministry of Defence police, there will be substitution by the Home Office police to achieve the same level of policing. I do not believe that that will happen. However, constructive discussions are taking place about joint control rooms, for example, and there is best practice of county constabularies to be followed around the country, on such matters as joint patrolling. In Colchester, for example, there is an outstanding system whereby the Ministry of Defence police and the military police patrol with the county constabulary. That may be the way ahead.

I am much reassured by the chief constable of the Ministry of Defence police and by the answer that I received to a recent parliamentary question, informing me that radio communications between the county constabularies and the Ministry of Defence police are much better than they were even a year or two ago.

Local service engagements are a good idea. Whatever is decided for the future role of the Ministry of Defence police, there will be a role for local service engagements, but I view with great concern the contraction of the Ministry of Defence police, especially as—except in Whitehall—it is not quite clear exactly what will happen. The concept of area policing teams for Ministry of Defence police should be developed much further, but this is not the place to do it. It is a matter for the Defence Committee.

I am grateful for the opportunity to put on record my misgivings about what is happening to the Ministry of Defence police and to pay tribute to their work. It is of a very high standard and it is unique in that they now have full constabulary powers. They play an important role in the policing of our civilian communities and are often the first people to whom married quarters personnel turn when there is trouble on Army estates. My hon. Friend the Minister should be fully aware of the concern on both sides of the Committee.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (Fife, North–East): I cannot claim the length of commitment of the two hon. Members who have already spoken, but, as a member of the Defence Committee, I have had the opportunity to hear evidence on some of the matters with which the amendment is concerned and, at the invitation of my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel), I visited his constituency which contains the atomic weapons establishments at Burfield and Aldermaston. The Ministry of Defence police have a significant, important and considerable role in ensuring proper practice in and around those establishments.

If the clause were to become law, it would not be mandatory, but permissive. It would allow the Ministry of Defence—if it so chose—to introduce a system of local service engagements. The nature of the debate so far, and in particular the misgivings that were expressed by the two hon. Gentlemen who have spoken, seems to argue strongly against the introduction of such a service.

The hon. Member for Broxtowe (Sir J. Lester), in an intervention, identified the central issue. The Ministry of Defence police do not function merely as armed guards. They possess full police powers, so they can prevent crime and deal directly with criminals and all other categories of person. Those inducted under a system of local service engagements would have a limited capability. They would have legal powers over service personnel only and there is much evidence to suggest that civilians constitute the main threat to the security of defence property.

If the basis of the proposal is the desire to make savings, any savings that may be made by reducing the number of Ministry of Defence police must be set against the cost of making members of that force redundant, establishing a new organisation and—what is not always fully considered—the effect of the substantial sums, perhaps running into millions of pounds, that must be saved every year by virtue of their ability to prevent and detect crime, a capability that those on local service engagements could not possess.

The hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George) rightly drew attention to the rather curious conditions that may attach to service in such a force. Recruits are to be drawn from ex-service personnel. They will be offered considerably lower rates of pay than those available in the Army, their conditions of service will be much inferior to those currently enjoyed in the Army and there will be no long-term job security. They will have to observe service discipline, and their principal activity will be static armed guarding, which is notoriously unpopular in the armed services. It seems that the proposition in respect of local service engagements is hardly attractive, so there must be considerable doubt whether enough people of the right calibre could be recruited on those terms.

If the Ministry of Defence police are removed from an area, it will still require policing. That burden will inevitably fall on what are described as the Home Department police—the local force in any area—and it is one that, so far, they have not been required to bear.

[Mr. Menzies Campbell]

I shall be interested to know what the reactions of chief constables throughout the land will be when they find themselves subject to an additional policing burden when there is continuing pressure from hon. Members in all parts of the House for the police to be more active and effective in preventing and detecting crime.

A concept similar to local service engagement has been presented on no fewer than three previous occasions, but it has been abandoned as unviable. The Government's proposals do not take sufficient account of the vital considerations of security, safety and crime prevention. If the hon. Member for Walsall, South feels compelled to force his amendment to a Division, he will certainly have my support.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Southend, East): I am certainly not opposed to change. I have often supported revolutionary change, but I appeal to the Minister to acknowledge that the proposed amendment is sensible and reasonable. Its purpose is not to overturn Government policy, but to suggest that there should at some stage be a review of a pilot scheme. I have seen many changes that were well intentioned but which turned out to provide a poorer service at greater expense. The Government's proposal is not new, but has been tried on three previous occasions and, as the hon. and learned Member for Fife, North–East (Mr. Campbell) said, it was abandoned because it could not work.

In 1985—probably before most of the hon. Members present entered the House, but I was here—the royal ordnance factories were privatised. They were purchased by British Aerospace but, as a result of serious doubts about lack of security expressed by the Defence Committee, the MOD police were forced on Royal Ordnance as a condition of sale. The House insisted that privatisation be subject to the provision of MOD police.

We must bear in mind the dangers of establishing new organisations. I know that the Government are wholly opposed to quangos—I am sure we all are—but, these days, there seem to be more and more little offices and officials, and more people supervising something. Somebody will have to supervise military local service engagement, monitor its operation and how good it is, its conditions and whether the interests of the law-abiding public are properly represented. Has consideration been given to the cost?

The removal of a well-respected police force with a record of success often has a serious effect on an organisation's security. The Minister is not only cautious, but thorough and talented. I hope that he acknowledges there is always a danger of clever people—unlike those of us on the Back Benches—with great ideas being carried away with implementing them, without in every case anticipating how they will turn out in practice.

The amendment is saying, "This is a wonderful idea, and it will provide a better service at lower cost"—as Conservatives always want to do—"but let us check in case it is not the right idea." There is a case for caution, because the concept was tried before and did not work. The amendment seems to make sound, common sense. Although revolutionaries such as me and other Back Benchers always want big changes, there is always the risk that things that are working perfectly well will be upset.

I ought to declare a constituency interest in that Southend, East is the location of DTEO Shoeburyness. The P and EE, as we used to call it, is now run by another organisation that I do not entirely understand—although I met its chief executive the other day. He has a nice big office. He is a splendid man, and I am sure that he does a great job. He told me that there is no doubt in the local community that the MOD police have a superb reputation, command great respect, and have a great tradition of success.

The proposed revolutionary change of halving the number of MOD police from 5,000 to 2,500 should not proceed until we can see that it will work. I appeal to the Minister to accept the spirit of the amendment, if not the amendment. We are not asking him to abandon a brilliant idea. It may be brilliant, although some people, like me, do not think so. Let us try to establish whether it is a brilliant idea before going ahead with it. The Government, as we all know, have been wonderful. They have great ideas and have made many great changes. Let us not spoil our record of success by going ahead with a change that might not work as brilliantly as all the other measures that they have introduced.

5.15 pm

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Port Glasgow): Speaking as a reformist rather than as a revolutionary, I must at the outset declare a constituency interest. A goodly number of my constituents work across the Firth of Clyde at Calport and Faslane—some of them as police men and women. My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George) reasonably and sanely argued against the Ministry of Defence taking a precipitate decision about the terms and conditions of employment for those men and women. They are a fine body of decent, loyal, hard-working and highly skilled officers who deserve much better than that which the Bill proposes.

No change should be made before there is a genuine consultative process that involves those police officers or their representatives. The hon. and learned Member for Fife, North–East (Mr. Campbell) spoke of the range of duties performed by MOD police, and he made the significant point that they often have to act against civilians. That is most clearly seen on the other side of the Clyde when there are demonstrations against nuclear submarines entering the river. As I have witnessed some of those demonstrations over the past 25 years, I can say with confidence that MOD police handle those often difficult situations in a mature and level-headed way.

I am not sure how many MOD police officers are employed at Calport and Faslane, but they must number 200 or 300. They, with their colleagues elsewhere in Scotland and south of the border, deserve fair-minded treatment. If they are to be presented with change, it can be legitimate only when it meets some of the understandable concerns and worries felt by those officers. I ask the Minister to accept the amendment and to ensure that any change is made only after genuine consultation with the representatives of the police officers in question.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): I share the regard for the dedicated service given by Ministry of Defence police. I voted, as Chairman of the Select Committee on the Bill,

against a comparable amendment, for two reasons—the Minister gave a categorical assurance that there would be a genuine pilot study of local service engagements, and there are two ways in which the MLSE concept can be scrutinised. One is by the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill, which has effectively ceased to exist because we have reported; the other is through the Select Committee on Defence, of which the hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George), my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) and others are members. There are two Committees.

The question is not whether the pilot scheme should be subject to scrutiny, but how that scrutiny should be carried out. The right way to maintain scrutiny of the pilot study is through the Select Committee on Defence. My hon. Friend the Minister was good enough to brief the Select Committee when the concept of local service engagements was first put forward, and he is to appear before the Committee on 4 June. We will continue our study and scrutiny, and that is the right way to do it.

Dr. John Reid (Motherwell, North): Since everyone else has had a say, I am more or less obliged to say something. This is an important issue, but there are other important issues before us tonight, so I shall keep my comments brief. The Minister knows my views, which I have expressed. I am not convinced that we need another guard service or that we will be able to recruit the members of such a service as he suggests. I am thoroughly unconvinced that the figures for supposed costings have been prepared well, since we do not even know yet what the redundancy payments for the Ministry of Defence police would be.

The matter was discussed at length in Committee, and it has been voted on. It has been the subject of an investigation and it will continue to be investigated by the Defence Committee. The Minister has already given assurances. I hope that he will repeat his assurances tonight about the genuine nature of the pilot scheme and I hope that that will be sufficient to allow my hon. Friends not to push the amendment to a Division, which would unnecessarily divide us across parties.

The Minister of State for the Armed Forces (Mr. Nicholas Soames): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Motherwell, North (Dr. Reid), and I am happy to repeat to the House the same assurances that my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) set out.

We have had a good debate. The hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George) feels very strongly about such matters, and I have a great deal of respect for him. His knowledge of defence matters is positively daunting, and I look forward to what I understand will be a cheerful and, I hope, brief exchange with him in the Defence Committee. I am sure that the business will be dealt with and dispatched with the vigour and speed that is well known. I should be in and out in about 15 minutes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) has, throughout, expressed great concern and interest in the Ministry of Defence police, and not just because the Ministry of Defence police do an admirable job in his constituency. My hon. Friend is aware that many of the defence agencies, which operate extremely effectively in his constituency, often make representations to him about the importance of trying to bear down on the costs of guarding, which are very high.

I am aware of the visit to Newbury by the hon. and learned Member for Fife, North–East (Mr. Campbell) and of his views, because he was good enough to discuss them with me earlier. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor) paid a warm tribute to the brilliance of the Government and I share that view wholeheartedly. My hon. Friend has always regarded me as a paralysed wet when it comes to his views on revolutions. The changes are not a revolution, but a nice adjustment. I noted carefully what my hon. Friend said and I shall deal with the important points that he raised.

The hon. Member for Greenock and Port Glasgow (Dr. Godman) also has an extensive MOD police presence in his constituency. He and I discussed this matter when he came to see me the other day. My hon. Friend the Member for Gosport was an able and admirable Chairman of the Select Committee and I am sure that we all wish to pay tribute to his work. I am happy to extend to him again the reassurances that I gave the Select Committee.

Clause 2 will give the armed forces the flexibility to recruit personnel for military service in a specified locality rather than worldwide. As the hon. Member for Walsall, South knows, that is not an attempt to get at the MOD police—but nothing will ever persuade him that it is not, because he has it fixed in his mind firmly that we are trying to get at them. I wish to join the hon. Gentleman and all those hon. Members who paid tribute to the work of the MOD police. They do a splendid job and are a fine force that is greatly respected.

There are some tasks that might be unattractive to, or inappropriate for, full engagement regulars, but they might none the less best be carried out by uniformed service personnel rather than by civilians or police officers. The reasons for considering the use of local service personnel could vary according to the circumstances of the case. There are no plans or proposals for the general introduction of local service schemes other than for guarding. The Bill would give the option to introduce such schemes if the services saw a need for them before the next Armed Forces Bill in five years' time.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport said, the matter has been carefully discussed in the Committee, and we have been round this buoy on several occasions. My hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury raised an important point about joint working. As he knows, I wholly endorse his views. I am determined to press forward on the matter, and I know that there is already a joint arrangement on Salisbury plain, which my hon. Friend has seen and which is extremely impressive and works well. I note his comments and I am well aware of his views.

On current assumptions, the size of the MOD police is expected to fall to between 2,500 and 3,000 by the early years of the next century. I want to make it plain to the House that it is my intention that they remain a substantial force able to provide a civil policing service, where that is required, throughout the whole Department. The chief constable and I are entirely confident that a force of 2,500 to 3,000, properly structured and resourced, will be able to do so. The force will lose some of the work that does not need to be done by police officers. In future, it will concentrate more on its constabulary role, as Sir John Blelloch recommended.

I agree with the hon. Member for Walsall, South that the MOD police must be the most reviewed police force in the country. It has emerged from all the reviews with

[Mr. Nicholas Soames]

great credit, and the suggestion that morale is low is not true. They have had a difficult time, as have other parts of the Ministry of Defence, during a period of great change. The Select Committee heard from the chief constable that morale is not as low as some hon. Members have suggested.

Sir Jim Lester: One of the pilot schemes is taking place in my constituency. I can assure my hon. Friend that morale is not very high. The MOD police have been visited by somebody who talked about redundancy and how quickly the pilot scheme could be brought in. With respect, I request my hon. Friend to be sensitive to the people affected by the pilot schemes—never mind the bigger schemes—before any final decision is made.

Mr. Soames: My hon. Friend will never deal with a more sensitive Minister than me. He has my assurance that I shall be extremely sensitive.

One of the new developments to which I referred concerns the MOD police area policing teams. As some hon. Members will know, we have already set up three teams, and I have now decided that the concept should be extended to other areas in Great Britain where teams are needed. That will require some additional MOD police posts, which should reduce the need for voluntary early retirements or severances during the Military Provost Guard Service—MPGS—pilot scheme.

Another factor that should reduce the need for MOD police voluntary early retirements or severances is the position of the royal ordnance factories. We had proposed to withdraw them from three royal ordnance factories when some important security enhancements had been completed to the satisfaction of the licensing authorities. The chief constables concerned and the Health and Safety Executive told us that they had no objections. In the event of an armed response being required at one of those factories, the local police would have provided it. I have now decided, however, that, in view of the current terrorist threat, this is not the right time to implement the proposal. I have therefore deferred the measure for two years, and we will consider the situation again in the light of the terrorist threat at that time.

Hon. Members have said that they foresee difficulties with recruiting for the military local service engagements. It is the considered judgment of the Ministry of Defence and the Army that that will not be the case. The members of the Select Committee who have made visits to familiarise themselves with the situation will realise that there are many young men and women who wish to leave the services but to continue their close association with service life. We believe that we will indeed be able to attract people of sufficient calibre to such a scheme.

If the MPGS pilot scheme were successful, the main scheme would follow on after about two years. About 500 further MOD police officers, employed only on guarding duties, would be replaced by military local service engagement soldiers. The earliest date for the beginning of the main scheme would be 1 April 1999. I expect to be ready to consult about the main scheme locations during the autumn. It will not be possible to do so earlier because of on-site complementary reviews that are still required at some sites that are under consideration. I have heard what my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Sir J. Lester) said about Chilwell. He is only too aware that he has discussed the matter with me on many occasions. He understands that I am entirely aware of the situation.

5.30 pm

Since the MPGS investment appraisals and affordability assessments were prepared last spring, a great deal of work has been done to develop the scheme. Much work has been done also on all the other proposals set out in all the various policing and guarding consultative documents. It is not surprising that some of the assumptions made last spring have needed some adjustment. I have therefore announced that the Ministry of Defence is preparing a new investment appraisal and affordability assessment to reflect the necessary changes. I have promised to make the results known to the Select Committee on Defence when I give evidence on 4 June. I am looking forward enormously to that occasion. I have ordered a new set of armour for it.

The new investment appraisal and affordability assessment will be set out also in a new consultative document, which will be issued shortly. That will be subject to further consultation. Although work on the new investment appraisal has not been completed, it is clear that it will confirm that the proposal offers the Ministry the prospect of significant resource-cost saving over the medium to long term without reduction in security standards. I am aware that the hon. Member for Walsall, South attaches the highest importance to that.

Concern has been expressed about the cost of redundancies. We are not expecting any compulsory redundancies. The planned reduction in size is enabling a number of officers, who wish to do so, to leave the force on voluntary early retirement or voluntary early severance terms. For reasons unconnected with the MPGS proposal, 331 officers left the force in that way last year. Until now, we have had to assume that the implementation of the MPGS pilot scheme next year will require consequential MPGS losses to be covered by a further scheme.

The amendment is defective. It might prevent any pilot scheme ever being implemented, which I am sure is not the intention. It might be interpreted as not allowing regulations permitting the introduction of MLSE to be made until a report has been made on the MPGS pilot scheme. In fact, the pilot scheme cannot be introduced until the MLSE regulations have been made.

I note the concerns that have been expressed on both sides of the Committee. I hope that the assurance that I gave in the Select Committee will be accepted by the Committee of the whole House. I note especially the points that have been made by my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, East, to whom I defer in many ways. He says, importantly, that there is no point in change for the sake of change. My hon. Friend feels that something that works well should not be changed.

I accept that the system works very well, but it is expensive. I know that my hon. Friend will agree that the Ministry of Defence, which has had to bear down throughout its budget in every department, must examine carefully where high costs, which might be reduced, are incurred.

I ask the Committee to reject the amendment.

Mr. George: I assure the Minister that he need bring with him to the Select Committee on Defence not a suit of

armour, but another suit. No one except the Minister appears to be enthusiastic about the proposal in clause 2. Most hon. Members seem to be downright opposed to it. Those who have not have been less than enthusiastic. To retain the bipartisan approach of the House of Commons and of the Select Committee on Defence, which will be meeting the Minister shortly—it will be an occasion when we can explain and probe rather more fully than is possible in the Chamber—I shall take into account the partial concessions that have been offered.

I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clauses 2 to 4 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New clause 5

PROCEDURE FOR DEALING WITH OFFENCES UNDER SERVICES ACTS

'. Schedule (*procedure for dealing with offences under Services Acts*) to this Act (amendment of provisions relating to the procedure for dealing with offences under the Army Act 1955, the Air Force Act 1955 and the Naval Discipline Act 1957) shall have effect.'—*[Mr. Soames.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. Soames: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr. Michael Morris): With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following: Government new schedule 1—*Procedure for dealing with offences under Services Acts.*

Government amendments Nos. 1, 2, 51, 57, 58, 61, 62, 64, 67, 68, 71, 72 and 78.

Paragraphs 64 and 65 of the new schedule do not appear in the amendment paper. The correct and complete version of the schedule has been reissued separately and is available in the Vote Office.

Mr. Soames: The amendments, and especially new clause 5 and new schedule 1, incorporate the greater part of the court martial reform package that I announced last year. Part of the package is already in the Bill. It appears in clauses 12 to 16, which deal with post-trial procedures. New schedule 1 sets out the detail of the new procedures at the pre-trial and trial stages. The purpose of the reforms is to reinforce the independence of the court martial, principally by reducing the apparent influence of the chain of command while preserving its necessary involvement. I hope that the reforms will find favour with the Committee.

Dr. Reid: There is much before us that has already been discussed fully in Committee. We are dealing with consequential amendments or amendments that have already been circulated to the Committee by courtesy of the Minister. There are amendments with which I and my colleagues agree. We shall attempt to minimise the time that we spend debating them.

We welcome every move that has been made to create a sense of independence between the command structure and the prosecution structure so as to entrench a system of appeals that is less liable to be found wanting. Therefore, in substance, we approve of all the amendments that have been proposed by the Minister. I wish to say now, as I did in the Select Committee, that my colleagues and I still believe that there will be sufficient grounds for an endless stream of lawyers—well educated, well briefed and in most instances well heeled—to drive a reluctant Ministry of Defence continually to the European Court of Human Rights on the court martial system and on other issues. We welcome the proposals as far as they go, and will not intervene again in the consideration of new clause 5, new schedule 1 and the amendments. We take this decision for reasons of time, of which the Committee will be well aware.

Mr. Soames: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I am grateful to the Committee generally for its tolerance in accepting the manner in which the new clause, the new schedule and the amendments have been presented to it. Sight was given of what the various amendments would look like and the further shape of them was dependent on further drafting. I am most grateful to the hon. Member for Motherwell, North (Dr. Reid) for what he has said. I share his concern, of course, about the European Court—we all do—but we believe that the court martial system has served the United Kingdom extremely well, including our armed forces. We shall be prepared to take our chance, the same as everyone else.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Schedule

PROCEDURE FOR DEALING WITH OFFENCES UNDER SERVICES ACTS

PART I

SUMMARY DISPOSAL OF OFFENCES

Army Act 1955 (c. 18)

1. The Army Act 1955 shall be amended as follows.

2. For section 76 there shall be substituted the following sections—

"Investigation of charges by commanding officer

76.—(1) An allegation that a person subject to military law ("the accused") has committed an offence against any provision of this Part of this Act shall be reported, in the form of a charge, to his commanding officer.

(2) A commanding officer shall investigate a charge reported to him under subsection (1) above.

(3) If, in the course of investigating a charge, the commanding officer considers it appropriate to do so, he may amend the charge or substitute another charge for it and treat the amended or substituted charge as if that charge had been reported to him under subsection (1) above.

(4) If, in the course of investigating a charge, it appears to the commanding officer that proceedings in respect of the matters to which the charge relates could be, and in the interests of the better administration of justice should be, taken against the accused otherwise than under this Act he may stay further proceedings with respect to the charge.

(5) After investigating a charge the commanding officer may, subject to subsection (6) below—

(a) dismiss the charge;

(b) refer the charge to higher authority; or

(c) deal summarily with the charge.

(6) The commanding officer may not deal summarily with a charge if—

(a) the accused is an officer or warrant officer; or

(b) the charge is not capable of being dealt with summarily.

(7) This section has effect subject to any power of the commanding officer under section 103A(1) below to direct that the charge be tried by a field general court–martial.

Powers of higher authority

76A.—(1) Where a charge is referred to higher authority, the higher authority shall refer the case to the prosecuting authority unless he takes one of the steps mentioned in this section in relation to the charge.

(2) The higher authority may refer the charge back to the commanding officer of the accused with a direction to dismiss it or to stay all further proceedings in relation to it, and the commanding officer shall deal with the charge accordingly.

(3) If the charge is against a non–commissioned officer or soldier and is capable of being dealt with summarily, the higher authority may refer it back to the commanding officer of the accused to be so dealt with.

(4) If the charge is against an officer below the rank of lieutenant–colonel or a warrant officer and is capable of being dealt with summarily, the higher authority may refer it to the appropriate superior authority to be so dealt with.

(5) If the charge has been referred to the higher authority as a result of an election for court–martial trial, and that election has not been withdrawn with leave, he may not refer the charge back to the commanding officer of the accused, or (as the case may be) to the appropriate superior authority, to be dealt with summarily.

(6) This section has effect subject to any power of the higher authority under section 103A(1) below to direct that the charge be tried by a field general court–martial.

Summary dealings

76B.—(1) This section applies where a charge is to be dealt with summarily by a commanding officer or appropriate superior authority.

(2) References in this Act to dealing summarily with a charge are references to the taking of the following action, namely, determining whether the charge is proved and, accordingly, either dismissing the charge or recording a finding that the charge has been proved and awarding punishment.

(3) If, before determining whether the charge is proved, he considers it appropriate to do so, the commanding officer or appropriate superior authority may amend the charge or substitute another charge for it and treat the amended or substituted charge as the charge to be dealt with summarily by him.

(4) If, before determining whether the charge is proved, he considers that it should not be dealt with summarily, the commanding officer or appropriate superior authority may refer the charge to higher authority.

(5) If he determines that the charge has been proved, the commanding officer or appropriate superior authority shall, before recording a finding that the charge has been proved, afford the accused an opportunity of electing court–martial trial.

(6) If the accused so elects, the commanding officer or appropriate superior authority shall refer the charge to higher authority with a view to the trial of the accused by court–martial.

(7) If the accused does not so elect, or so elects but subsequently withdraws his election with leave, the commanding officer or appropriate superior authority shall record a finding that the charge has been proved and award punishment accordingly.

(8) If a charge has been referred to higher authority as a result of an election for court–martial trial, and that election is withdrawn with leave, the higher authority shall—

(a) if the accused is an officer or warrant officer, refer the charge back to the appropriate superior authority;

(b) if the accused is a non–commissioned officer or soldier, refer the charge back to the commanding officer of the accused,

for the appropriate superior authority or commanding officer to record a finding that the charge has been proved and award punishment accordingly.

(9) This section has effect subject to any power of the commanding officer or appropriate superior authority under section 103A(1) below to direct that the charge be tried by a field general court–martial.

(10) Nothing in this section or section 76A above shall be taken to prevent an officer from acting as both higher authority and appropriate superior authority in relation to a charge.

Punishments available on summary dealings

76C.—(1) This section applies where a commanding officer or appropriate superior authority records a finding that a charge against an accused has been proved.

(2) The commanding officer may award one or more of the following punishments—

(a) if the offender is a soldier, detention for a period not exceeding 60 days;

(b) fine;

(c) if the offender is a non–commissioned officer, severe reprimand or reprimand;

(d) where the offence has occasioned any expense, loss or damage, stoppages;

(e) any minor punishment for the time being authorised by the Defence Council.

(3) The appropriate superior authority may award one or more of the following punishments—

(a) except in the case of a warrant officer, forfeiture of seniority for a specified term or otherwise;

(b) fine;

(c) severe reprimand or reprimand;

(d) where the offence has occasioned any expense, loss or damage, stoppages.

(4) The commanding officer may not award a fine or minor punishment for an offence for which he awards detention.

(5) The appropriate superior authority may not award a fine for an offence for which he awards forfeiture of seniority.

(6) Except in the case of an offence against section 70 of this Act, the amount of a fine shall not exceed the amount of the offender's pay for twenty–eight days.

(7) In the case of an offence against section 70 of this Act where the corresponding civil offence is a summary offence, the amount of a fine shall not exceed—

(a) the amount of the offender's pay for twenty–eight days; or

(b) (if less) the maximum amount of the fine which could be imposed by a civil court on summary conviction.

(8) In the case of an offence against section 70 of this Act where the corresponding civil offence is an indictable offence, the amount of a fine shall not exceed—

(a) the amount of the offender's pay for twenty–eight days; or

(b) (if less) the maximum amount of the fine which could be imposed by a civil court on conviction on indictment.

(9) A day's pay shall be taken, for the purposes of subsections (6) to (8) above, to be the gross pay that is, or would (apart from any forfeiture) be, issuable to the offender in respect of the day on which punishment is awarded in respect of the offence.

(10) If the offender is a lance–corporal or lance–bombardier, the commanding officer may, if he awards no other punishment or no other punishment except stoppages, order the offender to be reduced to the ranks.

(11) If the offender is an acting warrant officer or non–commissioned officer, the commanding officer may, if he awards no other punishment or no other punishment except stoppages, order the offender—

(a) to revert to his permanent rank;

(b) to assume an acting rank lower than that held by him but higher than his permanent rank; or

(c) where his permanent rank is that of lance–corporal or lance–bombardier, to forfeit his acting rank and be reduced to the ranks."

3. Sections 77 to 80 shall cease to have effect.

4.—(1) Section 82 (officers who are to act as commanding officers and appropriate superior authorities) shall be amended as follows.

(2) For subsection (2) there shall be substituted the following subsection—

"(2) A person may act as appropriate superior authority in relation to a person charged with an offence if—

(a) he is a general officer, flag officer, air officer or brigadier, or

(b) where the Defence Council so direct, he is a colonel or a naval or air force officer of corresponding rank."

(3) Subsection (3) shall cease to have effect.

5. For section 83 there shall be substituted the following section—

"Regulations as to summary dealings etc

83.—(1) The Defence Council may make regulations with respect to the investigation of charges by commanding officers and summary dealings by commanding officers and appropriate superior authorities.

(2) Regulations under this section may in particular make provision with respect to—

(a) the reporting of a charge to a commanding officer;

(b) the procedure to be followed by a commanding officer investigating a charge;

(c) the delegation by the commanding officer of any of his functions;

(d) the charges which are capable of being dealt with summarily;

(e) the amendment or substitution of charges;

(f) the procedure on summary dealings;

(g) limitations on the punishments which may be awarded on a summary dealing by a commanding officer or appropriate superior authority of a specified description;

(h) the information to be provided to a person afforded an opportunity of electing court–martial trial;

(i) the procedure for electing court–martial trial, including any period within which any such election may be made;

(j) the procedure for requesting leave to withdraw an election for court–martial trial and for withdrawing any such election;

(k) who may act as the higher authority and the appropriate superior authority in specified descriptions of cases;

(l) who is to act as the higher authority and the appropriate superior authority in any particular case.

(3) A regulation under this section which is inconsistent with the provisions of this Act shall to the extent of the inconsistency be void."

Air Force Act 1955 (c. 19)

6. The Air Force Act 1955 shall be amended as follows.

7. For section 76 there shall be substituted the following sections—

"Investigation of charges by commanding officer

76.—(1) An allegation that a person subject to air–force law ("the accused") has committed an offence against any provision of this Part of this Act shall be reported, in the form of a charge, to his commanding officer.

(2) A commanding officer shall investigate a charge reported to him under subsection (1) above.

(3) If, in the course of investigating a charge, the commanding officer considers it appropriate to do so, he may amend the charge or substitute another charge for it and treat the amended or substituted charge as if that charge had been reported to him under subsection (1) above.

(4) If, in the course of investigating a charge, it appears to the commanding officer that proceedings in respect of the matters to which the charge relates could be, and in the interests of the better administration of justice should be, taken against the accused otherwise than under this Act he may stay further proceedings with respect to the charge.

(5) After investigating a charge the commanding officer may, subject to subsection (6) below—

(a) dismiss the charge;

(b) refer the charge to higher authority; or

(c) deal summarily with the charge.

(6) The commanding officer may not deal summarily with a charge if—

(a) the accused is an officer or warrant officer; or

(b) the charge is not capable of being dealt with summarily.

(7) This section has effect subject to any power of the commanding officer under section 103A(1) below to direct that the charge be tried by a field general court–martial.

Powers of higher authority

76A.—(1) Where a charge is referred to higher authority, the higher authority shall refer the case to the prosecuting authority unless he takes one of the steps mentioned in this section in relation to the charge.

(2) The higher authority may refer the charge back to the commanding officer of the accused with a direction to dismiss it or to stay all further proceedings in relation to it, and the commanding officer shall deal with the charge accordingly.

(3) If the charge is against a non–commissioned officer or airman and is capable of being dealt with summarily, the higher authority may refer it back to the commanding officer of the accused to be so dealt with.

(4) If the charge is against an officer below the rank of wing commander or a warrant officer and is capable of being dealt with summarily, the higher authority may refer it to the appropriate superior authority to be so dealt with.

(5) If the charge has been referred to the higher authority as a result of an election for court–martial trial, and that election has not been withdrawn with leave, he may not refer the charge back to the commanding officer of the accused, or (as the case may be) to the appropriate superior authority, to be dealt with summarily.

(6) This section has effect subject to any power of the higher authority under section 103A(1) below to direct that the charge be tried by a field general court–martial.

Summary dealings

76B.—(1) This section applies where a charge is to be dealt with summarily by a commanding officer or appropriate superior authority.

(2) References in this Act to dealing summarily with a charge are references to the taking of the following action, namely, determining whether the charge is proved and, accordingly, either dismissing the charge or recording a finding that the charge has been proved and awarding punishment.

(3) If, before determining whether the charge is proved, he considers it appropriate to do so, the commanding officer or appropriate superior authority may amend the charge or

substitute another charge for it and treat the amended or substituted charge as the charge to be dealt with summarily by him.

(4) If, before determining whether the charge is proved, he considers that it should not be dealt with summarily, the commanding officer or appropriate superior authority may refer the charge to higher authority.

(5) If he determines that the charge has been proved, the commanding officer or appropriate superior authority shall, before recording a finding that the charge has been proved, afford the accused an opportunity of electing court–martial trial.

(6) If the accused so elects, the commanding officer or appropriate superior authority shall refer the charge to higher authority with a view to the trial of the accused by court–martial.

(7) If the accused does not so elect, or so elects but subsequently withdraws his election with leave, the commanding officer or appropriate superior authority shall record a finding that the charge has been proved and award punishment accordingly.

(8) If a charge has been referred to higher authority as a result of an election for court–martial trial, and that election is withdrawn with leave, the higher authority shall—

(a) if the accused is an officer or warrant officer, refer the charge back to the appropriate superior authority;

(b) if the accused is a non–commissioned officer or airman, refer the charge back to the commanding officer of the accused,

for the appropriate superior authority or commanding officer to record a finding that the charge has been proved and award punishment accordingly.

(9) This section has effect subject to any power of the commanding officer or appropriate superior authority under section 103A(1) below to direct that the charge be tried by a field general court–martial.

(10) Nothing in this section or section 76A above shall be taken to prevent an officer from acting as both higher authority and appropriate superior authority in relation to a charge.

Punishments available on summary dealings

76C.—(1) This section applies where a commanding officer or appropriate superior authority records a finding that a charge against an accused has been proved.

(2) The commanding officer may award one or more of the following punishments—

(a) if the offender is an airman, detention for a period not exceeding 60 days;

(b) fine;

(c) if the offender is a non–commissioned officer, severe reprimand or reprimand;

(d) where the offence has occasioned any expense, loss or damage, stoppages;

(e) any minor punishment for the time being authorised by the Defence Council.

(3) The appropriate superior authority may award one or more of the following punishments—

(a) except in the case of a warrant officer, forfeiture of seniority for a specified term or otherwise;

(b) fine;

(c) severe reprimand or reprimand;

(d) where the offence has occasioned any expense, loss or damage, stoppages.

(4) The commanding officer may not award a fine or minor punishment for an offence for which he awards detention.

(5) The appropriate superior authority may not award a fine for an offence for which he awards forfeiture of seniority.

(6) Except in the case of an offence against section 70 of this Act, the amount of a fine shall not exceed the amount of the offender's pay for twenty–eight days.

(7) In the case of an offence against section 70 of this Act where the corresponding civil offence is a summary offence, the amount of a fine shall not exceed—

(a) the amount of the offender's pay for twenty–eight days; or

(b) (if less) the maximum amount of the fine which could be imposed by a civil court on summary conviction.

(8) In the case of an offence against section 70 of this Act where the corresponding civil offence is an indictable offence, the amount of a fine shall not exceed—

(a) the amount of the offender's pay for twenty–eight days; or

(b) (if less) the maximum amount of the fine which could be imposed by a civil court on conviction on indictment.

(9) A day's pay shall be taken, for the purposes of subsections (6) to (8) above, to be the gross pay that is, or would (apart from any forfeiture) be, issuable to the offender in respect of the day on which punishment is awarded in respect of the offence.

(10) If the offender is an acting warrant officer or non–commissioned officer, the commanding officer may, if he awards no other punishment or no other punishment except stoppages, order the offender—

(a) to revert to his permanent rank; or

(b) to assume an acting rank lower than that held by him but higher than his permanent rank."

8. Sections 77 to 80 shall cease to have effect.

9.—(1) Section 82 (officers who are to act as commanding officers and appropriate superior authorities) shall be amended as follows.

(2) For subsection (2) there shall be substituted the following subsection—

"(2) A person may act as appropriate superior authority in relation to a person charged with an offence if—

(a) he is an air officer, flag officer, general officer or brigadier, or

(b) where the Defence Council so direct, he is a group captain or a naval or military officer of corresponding rank."

(3) Subsection (3) shall cease to have effect.

10. For section 83 there shall be substituted the following section—

"Regulations as to summary dealings etc

83.—(1) The Defence Council may make regulations with respect to the investigation of charges by commanding officers and summary dealings by commanding officers and appropriate superior authorities.

(2) Regulations under this section may in particular make provision with respect to—

(a) the reporting of a charge to a commanding officer;

(b) the procedure to be followed by a commanding officer investigating a charge;

(c) the delegation by the commanding officer of any of his functions;

(d) the charges which are capable of being dealt with summarily;

(e) the amendment or substitution of charges;

(f) the procedure on summary dealings;

(g) limitations on the punishments which may be awarded on a summary dealing by a commanding officer or appropriate superior authority of a specified description;

(h) the information to be provided to a person afforded an opportunity of electing court–martial trial;

(i) the procedure for electing court–martial trial, including any period within which any such election may be made;

(j) the procedure for requesting leave to withdraw an election for court–martial trial and for withdrawing any such election;

(k) who may act as the higher authority and the appropriate superior authority in specified descriptions of cases;

(l) who is to act as the higher authority and the appropriate superior authority in any particular case.

(3) A regulation under this section which is inconsistent with the provisions of this Act shall to the extent of the inconsistency be void."

Naval Discipline Act 1957 (c. 53)

11. The Naval Discipline Act 1957 shall be amended as follows.

12. Sections 49, 50 and 52A shall cease to have effect.

13. After section 52A there shall be inserted the following sections—

"Investigation and summary trial

Investigation of charges by commanding officer

52B.—(1) An allegation that a person subject to this Act ("the accused") has committed an offence against any provision of this Act shall be reported, in the form of a charge, to his commanding officer.

(2) A commanding officer shall investigate a charge reported to him under subsection (1) above.

(3) If, in the course of investigating a charge, the commanding officer considers it appropriate to do so, he may amend the charge or substitute another charge for it and treat the amended or substituted charge as if that charge had been reported to him under subsection (1) above.

(4) If, in the course of investigating a charge, it appears to the commanding officer that proceedings in respect of the matters to which the charge relates could be, and in the interests of the better administration of justice should be, taken against the accused otherwise than under this Act he may stay further proceedings with respect to the charge.

(5) After investigating a charge, the commanding officer may, subject to subsection (6) below—

(a) dismiss the charge;

(b) refer the charge to higher authority; or

(c) try the accused summarily.

(6) The commanding officer may not try summarily—

(a) any charge against an officer; or

(b) any charge which is not capable of being tried summarily.

(7) For the purposes of this Act, a charge is capable of being tried summarily if it is for an offence triable by court–martial under this Act, other than an offence punishable by sentence of death or an offence of murder.

Powers of higher authority

52C.—(1) Where a charge is referred to higher authority, the higher authority shall refer the case to the prosecuting authority unless he takes one of the steps mentioned in this section in relation to the charge.

(2) The higher authority may refer the charge back to the commanding officer of the accused with a direction to dismiss it or to stay all further proceedings in relation to it; and the commanding officer shall deal with the charge accordingly.

(3) If the charge is against a rating and is capable of being tried summarily, the higher authority may, subject to subsection (4) below, refer it back to the commanding officer of the accused to be so tried.

(4) If the charge has been referred to the higher authority as a result of an election for court–martial trial, and that election has not been withdrawn with leave, he may not refer the charge back to the commanding officer of the accused to be tried summarily.

(5) This section has effect subject to any power of the higher authority under section 52G(1) below to order a disciplinary court.

Summary trial

52D.—(1) This section applies where a charge is to be tried summarily.

(2) If the commanding officer considers that, if the charge were proved, he would award a punishment—

(a) in the case of a warrant officer, of disrating, a fine or stoppages;

(b) in the case of any other rating, of dismissal from Her Majesty's service, detention or disrating,

he shall afford the accused an opportunity of electing court–martial trial.

(3) If the accused so elects and does not withdraw his election with leave, the commanding officer shall refer the charge to higher authority with a view to the trial of the accused by court–martial.

(4) If a charge has been referred to higher authority as a result of an election for court–martial trial, and that election is withdrawn with leave, the higher authority shall refer the charge back to the commanding officer of the accused to be tried summarily.

(5) If, in the course of trying the charge, the commanding officer considers that it should not be tried summarily, he may refer the charge to higher authority.

(6) If the commanding officer determines that the charge has not been proved, he shall acquit the accused.

(7) If the commanding officer determines that the charge has been proved, he shall record a finding of guilt and award punishment accordingly.

(8) A commanding officer shall not have power on a summary trial to award a sentence of dismissal with disgrace from Her Majesty's service, a sentence of imprisonment or a sentence of detention for any term exceeding three months.

Commanding officers

52E.—(1) In this Act "the commanding officer", in relation to a person charged with an offence, means the officer in command of the ship or naval establishment to which he belongs at the time of the commission of the offence or at the time of its investigation or summary trial.

(2) The Defence Council may by regulations make provision—

(a) enabling the powers conferred by this Act on the commanding officer of an accused to be exercised by other persons of such descriptions as may be specified;

(b) with respect to the delegation by the commanding officer, or other person exercising the powers of a commanding officer by virtue of regulations under paragraph (a) above, of any of his powers to any officer not below the rank of lieutenant or corresponding rank.

(3) An officer to whom any powers are delegated by virtue of subsection (2)(b) above shall not have power to award any punishment other than a fine, stoppages or those described in section 43(1)(m) of this Act.

(4) The reference in subsection (3) above to stoppages does not include a reference to stoppages for personal injury.

Regulations as to summary trial etc

52F.—(1) The Defence Council may make regulations with respect to the investigation of charges by commanding officers and summary trial.

(2) Regulations under this section may in particular make provision with respect to—

(a) the reporting of a charge to a commanding officer;

(b) the procedure to be followed by a commanding officer investigating a charge;

(c) the amendment or substitution of charges;

(d) the procedure on summary trial;

(e) limitations on the punishments which may be awarded on summary trial by a specified description of commanding officer;

(f) limitations on the punishments which may be so awarded to a specified description of accused;

(g) requirements for punishments to be approved before taking effect;

(h) the information to be provided to a person afforded an opportunity of electing court–martial trial;

(i) the procedure for electing court–martial trial, including any period within which any such election may be made;

(j) the procedure for requesting leave to withdraw an election for court–martial trial and for withdrawing any such election;

(k) who may act as the higher authority.

(3) A regulation under this section which is inconsistent with the provisions of this Act shall to the extent of the inconsistency be void.

Disciplinary courts

52G.—(1) If an officer of Her Majesty's naval forces below the rank of commander is charged with an offence to which this section applies at a time when the force to which he belongs is on active service, the higher authority to whom the charge was referred may order a disciplinary court.

(2) A disciplinary court shall have power, subject to the provisions of this section and of any rules made under it, to try and punish the offence accordingly.

(3) This section applies to any offence triable by court–martial under this Act other than an offence under the following provisions—

(a) sections 2 to 4, 6, 9, 10, 23 and 24, section 29(1) so far as relating to public or service property, section 29A, and sections 34 to 37 and 42;

(b) sections 40 and 41, so far as applicable to an offence under any of the provisions mentioned in paragraph (a) of this subsection.

(4) A disciplinary court shall consist of not less than three nor more than five officers, at least one of whom is not below the rank of commander.

(5) An officer shall not be a member of a disciplinary court unless he is an officer of Her Majesty's naval forces and is subject to this Act.

(6) The officer who orders a disciplinary court shall not be a member of the court.

(7) A disciplinary court shall not have power to award any punishment greater than dismissal from Her Majesty's service.

(8) The Secretary of State may by statutory instrument make rules as to the assembling, constitution, procedure and practice of disciplinary courts.

(9) Rules under subsection (8) above may apply in relation to disciplinary courts and to proceedings of such courts, with the necessary modifications, any provisions of this Part of this Act or of rules under section 58 of this Act relating to courts–martial and proceedings of courts–martial."

PART II

THE PROSECUTING AUTHORITY

Army Act 1955 (c. 18)

14. After section 83 of the Army Act 1955 there shall be inserted the following sections—

"The prosecuting authority

83A.—(1) Her Majesty may appoint a qualified officer belonging to Her military forces to be the prosecuting authority for the Army; and in this Act "the prosecuting authority" means the officer so appointed.

(2) An officer shall not be qualified to be appointed as the prosecuting authority unless he is—

(a) a person who has a ten year general qualification within the meaning of section 71 of the Courts and Legal Services Act 1990;

(b) an advocate or solicitor in Scotland of at least ten years' standing; or

(c) a member of the Bar of Northern Ireland, or a solicitor of the Supreme Court of Northern Ireland, of at least ten years' standing.

Functions of the prosecuting authority

83B.—(1) This section applies where a case has been referred to the prosecuting authority.

(2) If the case has been referred to him as a result of an election for court–martial trial, and that election is withdrawn with leave, the prosecuting authority shall—

(a) if the accused is an officer or warrant officer, refer the case to the appropriate superior authority;

(b) if the accused is a non–commissioned officer or soldier, refer the case to the commanding officer of the accused,

for the appropriate superior authority or commanding officer to record a finding that the preliminary charge has been proved and award punishment accordingly.

(3) In subsection (2) above "the preliminary charge" means the charge for which punishment would have been awarded had the accused not elected court–martial trial.

(4) If the prosecuting authority considers that court–martial proceedings under this Act should be instituted, he shall—

(a) determine any charge to be preferred and (subject to subsection (5) below) whether any such charge is to be tried by general court–martial or district court–martial; and

(b) prefer any charge so determined by him.

(5) The prosecuting authority shall not determine that a charge against an officer be tried by district court–martial.

(6) The prosecuting authority shall, in accordance with rules under section 103 of this Act, notify the commanding officer of the accused and a court administration officer of any charge preferred and the description of court–martial by which that charge is to be tried; and the commanding officer shall, in accordance with any such rules, inform the accused accordingly.

(7) The prosecuting authority shall have the conduct of any court–martial proceedings under this Act against the accused.

(8) Without prejudice to any other power of his in relation to the conduct of the proceedings, the prosecuting authority may, in accordance with rules under section 103 of this Act—

(a) amend, or substitute another charge or charges for, any charge preferred;

(b) prefer an additional charge, or additional charges, against the accused;

(c) discontinue proceedings on any charge.

(9) The powers mentioned in subsection (8)(a) above may be exercised in relation to an amended or substituted charge as well as in relation to any charge preferred by the prosecuting authority.

(10) The prosecuting authority may not exercise any power mentioned in subsection (8)(a) or (c) above in relation to any charge against the accused after the commencement of the trial of that charge unless the court–martial gives him leave to do so.

(11) If, before the commencement of the trial of a charge against the accused ("the original charge"), the prosecuting authority exercises the power mentioned in subsection (8)(b) above, he may, in accordance with rules under section 103 of this Act, direct any additional charge to be tried by the court–martial convened to try the original charge; and where he does so, subsection (6) above shall apply with such exceptions and modifications as may be prescribed.

(12) The prosecuting authority may not exercise the power mentioned in subsection (8)(b) above after the commencement of the trial of a charge against the accused unless the court–martial gives him leave to do so; and where the prosecuting authority exercises that power with the leave of the court–martial, the court may try any additional charge preferred.

(13) If, before the commencement of the trial of any charge, the prosecuting authority discontinues proceedings on that charge, he may direct that, for the purposes of section 134 of this Act, the accused is to be deemed to have been tried by court–martial for the offence charged.

(14) If, after the commencement of the trial of any charge, the prosecuting authority discontinues proceedings on that charge, the court–martial may give a direction such as is mentioned in subsection (13) above.

Prosecuting officers

83C.—(1) The prosecuting authority may delegate any of his functions to officers appointed by him as prosecuting officers.

(2) An officer shall not be appointed as a prosecuting officer unless he is—

(a) a person who has a general qualification within the meaning of section 71 of the Courts and Legal Services Act 1990;

(b) an advocate or solicitor in Scotland; or

(c) a member of the Bar of Northern Ireland or a solicitor of the Supreme Court of Northern Ireland."

Air Force Act 1955 (c. 19)

15. After section 83 of the Air Force Act 1955 there shall be inserted the following sections—

"The prosecuting authority

83A.—(1) Her Majesty may appoint a qualified officer belonging to Her air forces to be the prosecuting authority for the Royal Air Force; and in this Act "the prosecuting authority" means the officer so appointed.

(2) An officer shall not be qualified to be appointed as the prosecuting authority unless he is—

(a) a person who has a ten year general qualification within the meaning of section 71 of the Courts and Legal Services Act 1990;

(b) an advocate or solicitor in Scotland of at least ten years' standing; or

(c) a member of the Bar of Northern Ireland, or a solicitor of the Supreme Court of Northern Ireland, of at least ten years' standing.

Functions of the prosecuting authority

83B.—(1) This section applies where a case has been referred to the prosecuting authority.

(2) If the case has been referred to him as a result of an election for court–martial trial, and that election is withdrawn with leave, the prosecuting authority shall—

(a) if the accused is an officer or warrant officer, refer the case to the appropriate superior authority;

(b) if the accused is a non–commissioned officer or airman, refer the case to the commanding officer of the accused,

for the appropriate superior authority or commanding officer to record a finding that the preliminary charge has been proved and award punishment accordingly.

(3) In subsection (2) above "the preliminary charge" means the charge for which punishment would have been awarded had the accused not elected court–martial trial.

(4) If the prosecuting authority considers that court–martial proceedings under this Act should be instituted, he shall—

(a) determine any charge to be preferred and (subject to subsection (5) below) whether any such charge is to be tried by general court–martial or district court–martial; and

(b) prefer any charge so determined by him.

(5) The prosecuting authority shall not determine that a charge against an officer be tried by district court–martial.

(6) The prosecuting authority shall, in accordance with rules under section 103 of this Act, notify the commanding officer of the accused and a court administration officer of any charge preferred and the description of court–martial by which that charge is to be tried; and the commanding officer shall, in accordance with any such rules, inform the accused accordingly.

(7) The prosecuting authority shall have the conduct of any court–martial proceedings under this Act against the accused.

(8) Without prejudice to any other power of his in relation to the conduct of the proceedings, the prosecuting authority may, in accordance with rules under section 103 of this Act—

(a) amend, or substitute another charge or charges for, any charge preferred;

(b) prefer an additional charge, or additional charges, against the accused;

(c) discontinue proceedings on any charge.

(9) The powers mentioned in subsection (8)(a) above may be exercised in relation to an amended or substituted charge as well as in relation to any charge preferred by the prosecuting authority.

(10) The prosecuting authority may not exercise any power mentioned in subsection (8)(a) or (c) above in relation to any charge against the accused after the commencement of the trial of that charge unless the court–martial gives him leave to do so.

(11) If, before the commencement of the trial of a charge against the accused ("the original charge"), the prosecuting authority exercises the power mentioned in subsection (8)(b) above, he may, in accordance with rules under section 103 of this Act, direct any additional charge to be tried by the court–martial convened to try the original charge; and where he does so, subsection (6) above shall apply with such exceptions and modifications as may be prescribed.

(12) The prosecuting authority may not exercise the power mentioned in subsection (8)(b) above after the commencement of the trial of a charge against the accused unless the court–martial gives him leave to do so; and where the prosecuting authority exercises that power with the leave of the court–martial, the court may try any additional charge preferred.

(13) If, before the commencement of the trial of any charge, the prosecuting authority discontinues proceedings on that charge, he may direct that, for the purposes of section 134 of this Act, the accused is to be deemed to have been tried by court–martial for the offence charged.

(14) If, after the commencement of the trial of any charge, the prosecuting authority discontinues proceedings on that charge, the court–martial may give a direction such as is mentioned in subsection (13) above.

Prosecuting officers

83C.—(1) The prosecuting authority may delegate any of his functions to officers appointed by him as prosecuting officers.

(2) An officer shall not be appointed as a prosecuting officer unless he is—

(a) a person who has a general qualification within the meaning of section 71 of the Courts and Legal Services Act 1990;

(b) an advocate or solicitor in Scotland; or

(c) a member of the Bar of Northern Ireland or a solicitor of the Supreme Court of Northern Ireland."

Naval Discipline Act 1957 (c. 53)

16. After section 52G of the Naval Discipline Act 1957 there shall be inserted the following sections—

"The prosecuting authority

52H.—(1) Her Majesty may appoint a qualified officer of Her naval forces to be the prosecuting authority for the Royal Navy; and in this Act "the prosecuting authority" means the officer so appointed.

(2) An officer shall not be qualified to be appointed as the prosecuting authority unless he is—

(a) a person who has a five year general qualification within the meaning of section 71 of the Courts and Legal Services Act 1990;.

(b) an advocate or solicitor in Scotland of at least five years' standing; or

(c) a member of the Bar of Northern Ireland, or a solicitor of the Supreme Court of Northern Ireland, of at least five years' standing.

Functions of the prosecuting authority

52I.—(1) This section applies where a case has been referred to the prosecuting authority.

(2) If the case has been referred to him as a result of an election for court–martial trial, and that election is withdrawn with leave, the prosecuting authority shall refer the case to the commanding officer of the accused for the preliminary charge to be tried summarily.

(3) In subsection (2) above "the preliminary charge" means the charge which would have been tried summarily had the accused not elected court–martial trial.

(4) If the prosecuting authority considers that court–martial proceedings under this Act should be instituted, he shall determine any charge to be preferred and prefer any such charge.

(5) The prosecuting authority shall, in accordance with rules under section 58 of this Act, notify the commanding officer of the accused and a court administration officer of any charge preferred; and the commanding officer shall, in accordance with any such rules, inform the accused accordingly.

(6) The prosecuting authority shall have the conduct of any court–martial proceedings under this Act against the accused.

(7) Without prejudice to any other power of his in relation to the conduct of the proceedings, the prosecuting authority may, in accordance with rules under section 58 of this Act—

(a) amend, or substitute another charge or charges for, any charge preferred;

(b) prefer an additional charge, or additional charges, against the accused;

(c) discontinue proceedings on any charge.

(8) The powers mentioned in subsection (7)(a) above may be exercised in relation to an amended or substituted charge as well as in relation to any charge preferred by the prosecuting authority.

(9) The prosecuting authority may not exercise any power mentioned in subsection (7)(a) or (c) above in relation to any charge against the accused after the commencement of the trial of that charge unless the court–martial gives him leave to do so.

(10) If, before the commencement of the trial of a charge against the accused ("the original charge"), the prosecuting authority exercises the power mentioned in subsection (7)(b) above, he may, in accordance with rules under section 58 of this Act, direct any additional charge to be tried by the court–martial convened to try the original charge; and where he does so, subsection (5) above shall apply with such exceptions and modifications as may be prescribed.

(11) The prosecuting authority may not exercise the power mentioned in subsection (7)(b) above after the commencement of the trial of a charge against the accused unless the court–martial gives him leave to do so; and where the prosecuting authority exercises that power with the leave of the court–martial, the court may try any additional charge preferred.

(12) If, before the commencement of the trial of any charge, the prosecuting authority discontinues proceedings on that charge, he may direct that the accused shall not be liable to be tried summarily or by court–martial for the offence charged.

(13) If, after the commencement of the trial of any charge, the prosecuting authority discontinues proceedings on that charge, the court–martial may give a direction such as is mentioned in subsection (12) above.

Prosecuting officers

52J.—(1) The prosecuting authority may delegate any of his functions to officers appointed by him as prosecuting officers.

(2) An officer shall not be appointed as a prosecuting officer unless he is—

(a) a person who has a general qualification within the meaning of section 71 of the Courts and Legal Services Act 1990;

(b) an advocate or solicitor in Scotland; or

(c) a member of the Bar of Northern Ireland or a solicitor of the Supreme Court of Northern Ireland."

PART III

Army Act 1955 (c. 18)

17. The Army Act 1955 shall be amended as follows.

18. Section 84 shall cease to have effect.

19. After section 84 there shall be inserted the following sections—

"Court administration officers."

84A. In this Act—

"court administration officer" means an officer (or other person) appointed by the Defence Council to convene general and district courts–martial and perform such other functions as may be prescribed; and

"the court administration officer", in relation to a court–martial, means the court administration officer who convened the court–martial and includes his successor or any person for the time being exercising his or his successor's functions.

Judge advocates

84B.—(1) In this Act "the judge advocate", in relation to a court–martial, means the judge advocate appointed by or on behalf of the Judge Advocate General to be a member of the court–martial.

(2) No person shall be appointed as the judge advocate unless he is—

(a) a person who has a five year general qualification within the meaning of section 71 of the Courts and Legal Services Act 1990;

(b) an advocate in Scotland of at least five years' standing or a solicitor who has had a right of audience in the Court of Session or the High Court of Justiciary for at least five years; or

(c) a member of the Bar of Northern Ireland of at least five years' standing.

(3) Rulings and directions on questions of law (including questions of procedure and practice) shall be given by the judge advocate.

(4) Any directions given by the judge advocate shall be binding on the court.

Convening of general and district courts martial

84C.—(1) On being notified by the prosecuting authority of the charge preferred and the description of court–martial by which the charge is to be tried, a court administration officer shall by order convene a court–martial of that description.

(2) The order convening the court–martial shall specify—

(a) the date, time and place at which the court–martial is to sit;

(b) the officers who are to be members of the court–martial;

(c) which of those officers is to be president of the court–martial;

(d) any other officers appointed for the purpose of filling vacancies,

and shall state that a judge advocate appointed by or on behalf of the Judge Advocate General is to be a member of the court–martial.

(3) At any time before the commencement of the trial, the court administration officer may, in accordance with rules under section 103 of this Act, amend or withdraw the order convening the court–martial.

(4) The following shall not be eligible to be members of a court–martial for the trial of a charge—

(a) the court administration officer;

(b) an officer who at any time between the date on which the preliminary charge was reported to the commanding officer of the accused and the date of the trial has been the commanding officer of the accused;

(c) the higher authority to whom the preliminary charge against the accused was referred;

(d) any other officer who has investigated the subject matter of the charge against the accused;

(e) any other officer who under this Act has held, or has acted as one of the persons holding, an inquiry into matters relating to the subject matter of the charge against the accused.

(5) In subsection (4) above "the preliminary charge" means the charge referred to higher authority by the commanding officer of the accused.

Constitution of general and district courts-martial

84D.—(1) A general court–martial shall consist of the president, not less than four other military officers and the judge advocate.

(2) A district court–martial shall consist of the president, not less than two other military officers and the judge advocate.

(3) An officer shall not be appointed a member of a general court–martial unless he has held a commission in any of Her Majesty's naval, military or air forces for a period of not less than three years or for periods amounting in the aggregate to not less than three years.

(4) An officer shall not be appointed a member of a district court–martial unless he has held a commission in any of Her Majesty's naval, military or air forces for a period of not less than two years or for periods amounting in the aggregate to not less than two years.

(5) Not less than four of the members of a general court–martial shall be of a rank not below that of captain.

(6) A general court–martial for the trial of an officer above the rank of captain shall not include any member below the rank of captain.

(7) The president of a general or district court–martial shall not be below the rank of field officer unless in the opinion of the court administration officer a field officer having suitable qualifications is not, with due regard to the public service, available; and in any event the president of such a court–martial shall not be below the rank of captain.

(8) If, in the opinion of the court administration officer, the necessary number of military officers having suitable qualifications is not, with due regard to the public service, available, he may appoint as any member of the court (but not as its president) any naval or air–force officer of corresponding rank to that required for a military officer.

(9) In this section—

"air–force officer" means an officer belonging to Her Majesty's air forces and subject to air–force law;

"military officer" means an officer belonging to Her Majesty's military forces and subject to military law; and

"naval officer" means an officer belonging to Her Majesty's naval forces and subject to the Naval Discipline Act 1957."

20. Section 85(3) shall cease to have effect.

21. Sections 86 to 90 shall cease to have effect.

22.—(1) Section 91 (place for sitting of court–martial and adjournment to other places) shall be amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (1)—

(a) for the words "Her Majesty's dominions" there shall be substituted the words "the United Kingdom"; and

(b) the words from "and the convening officer" to the end shall cease to have effect.

(3) In subsection (2), for the words from "shall" to "direction" there shall be substituted the word "may".

23.—(1) Section 92 (challenges by accused to members of court–martial) shall be amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (1), for the word "officer" there shall be substituted the word "member".

(3) In subsection (2)—

(a) for the word "they" there shall be substituted the words "the officers appointed members"; and

(b) for the words "those officers" there shall be substituted the words "the members".

(4) In subsection (3)—

(a) for the word "officer" there shall be substituted the word "member"; and

(b) for the words from "considered" to the end there shall be substituted the words "determined by the judge advocate".

(5) In subsection (4)—

(a) for the words from "objection" to "it" there shall be substituted the words "an objection to the president is allowed"; and

(b) for the word "convening" there shall be substituted the words "court administration".

(6) In subsection (5)—

(a) for the words from "objection" to "it" there shall be substituted the words "an objection to any other officer appointed a member of the court is allowed";

(b) for the word "member" in the second place it appears there shall be substituted the word "officer"; and

(c) for the word "members" in the second place it appears there shall be substituted the word "officers".

(7) After subsection (5) there shall be added the following subsection—

"(6) If an objection to the judge advocate is allowed, the judge advocate shall retire and another judge advocate shall be appointed by or on behalf of the Judge Advocate General."

24.—(1) Section 93 (administration of oaths) shall be amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (1)—

(a) after the word "every" there shall be inserted the words "officer appointed a"; and

(b) the words "other than an exempted person" and "judge advocate" shall cease to have effect.

(3) Subsection (1A) shall cease to have effect.

25. In section 94 (courts–martial to sit in open court), after subsection (5) there shall be added the following subsections—

"(6) The judge advocate shall not be present while the other members of the court are deliberating on their finding on any charge.

(7) Any ruling or direction of the judge advocate on a question of law (including a question of procedure or practice) shall be given in open court.

(8) The judge advocate may determine, and give rulings on, questions of law (including questions of procedure and practice) in the absence of the other members of the court and of any officers and other persons under instruction."

26.—(1) Section 95 (dissolution of courts–martial) shall be amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (1)—

(a) for the words "whether before or after" there shall be substituted the word "before"; and

(b) for the word "convening" in both places it appears there shall be substituted the words "court administration".

(3) After subsection (1) there shall be inserted the following subsection—

"(1A) Where, after the commencement of the trial, it appears to the judge advocate necessary or expedient in the interests of the administration of justice that a court–martial should be dissolved, he may by order dissolve the court–martial."

(4) In subsection (3), for the words "convening officer" there shall be substituted the words "judge advocate".

(5) Subsection (4) shall cease to have effect.

27.—(1) Section 96 (decisions of courts–martial) shall be amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (1), for the words from "every" to "court–martial" there shall be substituted the words "the finding of a court–martial and any sentence awarded".

(3) After subsection (1) there shall be inserted the following subsection—

"(1A) The judge advocate shall not be entitled to vote on the finding."

(4) In subsection (3)—

(a) after the word "court" in the second place it appears there shall be inserted the words "entitled to vote on the finding"; and

(b) for the words "the members" in the second place they appear there shall be substituted the words "those members".

(5) In subsection (5), the words from "or on" to "finding" shall cease to have effect.

28. In section 97(3) (sentence of court–martial to be announced in open court) after the word "mercy" there shall be inserted the words "and any reasons for the sentence".

29.—(1) Section 99 (rules of evidence) shall be amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (1)—

(a) for the words "civil courts" there shall be substituted the words "trials on indictment"; and

(b) for the words "before a civil court" there shall be substituted the words "in a trial on indictment".

(3) In subsection (3), for the words "civil court" there shall be substituted the words "trial on indictment".

30. For section 103 there shall be substituted the following section—

"Rules

103.—(1) The Secretary of State may make rules with respect to—

(a) the investigation, prosecution and trial of, and awarding of punishment for, offences cognizable by courts–martial;

(b) the review of findings and sentences of courts–martial.

(2) Rules under this section may in particular make provision with respect to—

(a) proceedings preliminary to trials by general or district courts–martial;

(b) the appointment of a judge advocate for any preliminary proceedings;

(c) the delegation by court administration officers of any of their functions;

(d) the convening and constitution of general and district courts–martial;

(e) the sittings, adjournment and dissolution of general and district courts–martial;

(f) the procedure to be followed in trials by general and district courts–martial;

(g) the representation of the accused at such trials and any preliminary proceedings;

(h) procuring the attendance of witnesses at such trials and any preliminary proceedings;

(i) enabling a general or district court–martial, in such cases and to such extent as may be prescribed, to amend a charge which is being tried by the court;

(j) enabling a general or district court–martial, where the particulars proved or admitted at the trial differ from those alleged in the charge but are sufficient to support a finding of guilty of the like offence as that charged, to make a finding of guilty subject to exceptions or variations specified in the finding if it appears to the court that the difference is not so material as to have prejudiced the accused in his defence;

(k) directing that the powers conferred by section 7 of the Bankers' Books Evidence Act 1879 (which enables orders to be made for the inspection of bankers' books for the purposes of legal proceedings) may be exercised for the purposes of a general or district court–martial (whether within or without the United Kingdom) by the commanding officer of the accused or a judge advocate as well as by the court or a judge within the meaning of that Act;

(l) the forms of orders and other documents to be made for the purposes of any provision of this Act or of rules under this section;

(m) the cases in which, and extent to which, offences may be taken into consideration by a general or district court–martial and the powers of the court in relation to any offences taken into consideration;

(n) the recording of the proceedings of a general or district court–martial;

(o) the procedure to be followed on review of findings and sentences of general or district courts–martial.

(3) Rules made by virtue of paragraph (i) of subsection (2) above shall secure that the power to amend charges is not exercisable in circumstances substantially different from those in which indictments are amendable by a civil court in England, or otherwise than subject to the like conditions, as nearly as circumstances admit, as those subject to which indictments are so amendable.

(4) A rule under this section which is inconsistent with the provisions of this Act shall to the extent of the inconsistency be void.

(5) Rules under this section shall be made by statutory instrument which shall be subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament."

31. After section 103 there shall be inserted the following sections—

"Field General Courts-Martial

103A.—(1) Where an officer to whom this subsection applies—

(a) is commanding a body of the regular forces on active service; and

(b) is of opinion that it is not possible without serious detriment to the public service for a charge against a member of that body to be tried by a general or district court-martial,

he may direct that the charge be tried by a field general court-martial.

(2) Subsection (1) above applies to—

(a) the commanding officer who has investigated the charge;

(b) the commanding officer or appropriate superior authority who has determined on a summary dealing that the charge against the accused has been proved, in a case where the accused has elected court-martial trial and that election has not been withdrawn;

(c) where the charge is against an officer or warrant officer, the higher authority to whom the charge has been referred by the commanding officer.

(3) If an officer to whom subsection (1) above applies directs that a charge be tried by a field general court-martial, he shall by order convene a field general court-martial.

(4) The order convening the field general court-martial shall specify—

(a) the date, time and place at which the court-martial is to sit;

(b) the officers who are to be members of the court-martial;

(c) which of those officers is to be president of the court-martial.

(5) At any time before the commencement of the trial, the officer who convened the field general court-martial may, in accordance with rules under section 103C of this Act, amend or withdraw the order convening the court-martial.

(6) Subject to subsection (7) below, the officer convening the field general court-martial shall not be a member of the court-martial.

(7) The officer convening the field general court-martial may be its president if, in his opinion, it is not possible, without serious detriment to the public service, to appoint another officer as president.

Constitution of field general courts martial

103B.—(1) Subject to subsections (2) and (3) below, a field general court-martial shall consist of the president and not less than two other military officers.

(2) If the officer who convened the field general court-martial is of opinion that three military officers having suitable qualifications are not available without serious detriment to the public service, the field general court-martial shall consist of the president and one other military officer.

(3) Unless the officer convening the field general court-martial is of opinion that a judge advocate is not available without serious detriment to the public service, a judge advocate shall be a member of the court-martial.

(4) In subsection (3) above, "a judge advocate" means a judge advocate appointed by or on behalf of the Judge Advocate General or, if the officer convening the field general court-martial is of opinion that no such judge advocate is available without serious detriment to the public service, a qualified officer appointed by that officer.

(5) An officer is "qualified" for the purposes of subsection (4) above if he is—

(a) a person who has a general qualification within the meaning of section 71 of the Courts and Legal Services Act 1990;

(b) an advocate or solicitor in Scotland; or

(c) a member of the Bar of Northern Ireland or a solicitor of the Supreme Court of Northern Ireland.

(6) The president of a field general court-martial shall not be below the rank of captain.

(7) If a field general court-martial is to be convened at any place where in the opinion of the officer convening it the necessary number of military officers having suitable qualifications is not available to form the court, and cannot be made available without serious detriment to the public service, the officer may appoint as any member of the court (but not as its president) any naval or air-force officer of corresponding rank to that required for a military officer.

(8) A field general court-martial shall have the powers of a general court-martial except that where less than three officers are members of the court the sentence shall not exceed imprisonment for a term of two years or detention under section 71AA of this Act for a period of two years.

(9) In this section—

"air force officer" means an officer belonging to Her Majesty's air forces and subject to air-force law;

"military officer" means an officer belonging to Her Majesty's military forces and subject to military law; and

"naval officer" means an officer belonging to Her Majesty's naval forces and subject to the Naval Discipline Act 1957.

Field General Court Martial Rules

103C.—(1) The Secretary of State may by statutory instrument make rules with respect to field general courts-martial.

(2) Rules under this section may in particular—

(a) provide for any provision of this Act relating to general or district courts-martial or the proceedings of such courts-martial to apply to field general courts-martial or the proceedings of such courts-martial with the necessary modifications;

(b) make any provision with respect to field general courts-martial which may be made with respect to general and district courts-martial by rules under section 103 of this Act."

32. Sections 104 to 106 shall cease to have effect.

Air Force Act 1955 (c. 19)

33. The Air Force Act 1955 shall be amended as follows.

34. Section 84 shall cease to have effect.

35. After section 84 there shall be inserted the following sections—

"Court administration officers

84A. In this Act—

"court administration officer" means an officer (or other person) appointed by the Defence Council to convene general and district courts-martial and perform such other functions as may be prescribed; and

"the court administration officer", in relation to a court-martial, means the court administration officer who convened the court-martial and includes his successor or any person for the time being exercising his or his successor's functions.

Judge advocates

84B.—(1) In this Act "the judge advocate", in relation to a court–martial, means the judge advocate appointed by or on behalf of the Judge Advocate General to be a member of the court–martial.

(2) No person shall be appointed as the judge advocate unless he is—

(a) a person who has a five year general qualification within the meaning of section 71 of the Courts and Legal Services Act 1990;

(b) an advocate in Scotland of at least five years' standing or a solicitor who has had a right of audience in the Court of Session or the High Court of Justiciary for at least five years; or

(c) a member of the Bar of Northern Ireland of at least five years' standing.

(3) Rulings and directions on questions of law (including questions of procedure and practice) shall be given by the judge advocate.

(4) Any directions given by the judge advocate shall be binding on the court.

Convening of general and district courts martial

84C.—(1) On being notified by the prosecuting authority of the charge preferred and the description of court–martial by which the charge is to be tried, a court administration officer shall by order convene a court–martial of that description.

(2) The order convening the court–martial shall specify—

(a) the date, time and place at which the court–martial is to sit;

(b) the officers who are to be members of the court–martial;

(c) which of those officers is to be president of the court–martial;

(d) any other officers appointed for the purpose of filling vacancies,

and shall state that a judge advocate appointed by or on behalf of the Judge Advocate General is to be a member of the court–martial.

(3) At any time before the commencement of the trial, the court administration officer may, in accordance with rules under section 103 of this Act, amend or withdraw the order convening the court–martial.

(4) The following shall not be eligible to be members of a court–martial for the trial of a charge—

(a) the court administration officer;

(b) an officer who at any time between the date on which the preliminary charge was reported to the commanding officer of the accused and the date of the trial has been the commanding officer of the accused;

(c) the higher authority to whom the preliminary charge against the accused was referred;

(d) any other officer who has investigated the subject matter of the charge against the accused;

(e) any other officer who under this Act has held, or has acted as one of the persons holding, an inquiry into matters relating to the subject matter of the charge against the accused.

(5) In subsection (4) above "the preliminary charge" means the charge referred to higher authority by the commanding officer of the accused.

Constitution of general and district courts martial

84D.—(1) A general court–martial shall consist of the president, not less than four other air–force officers and the judge advocate.

(2) A district court–martial shall consist of the president, not less than two other air–force officers and the judge advocate.

(3) An officer shall not be appointed a member of a general court–martial unless he has held a commission in any of Her Majesty's naval, military or air forces for a period of not less than three years or for periods amounting in the aggregate to not less than three years.

(4) An officer shall not be appointed a member of a district court–martial unless he has held a commission in any of Her Majesty's naval, military or air forces for a period of not less than two years or for periods amounting in the aggregate to not less than two years.

(5) Not less than four of the members of a general court–martial shall be of a rank not below that of flight lieutenant.

(6) A general court–martial for the trial of an officer above the rank of flight lieutenant shall not include any member below the rank of flight lieutenant.

(7) The president of a general or district court–martial shall not be below the rank of squadron leader unless in the opinion of the court administration officer a squadron leader having suitable qualifications is not, with due regard to the public service, available; and in any event the president of such a court–martial shall not be below the rank of flight lieutenant.

(8) If, in the opinion of the court administration officer, the necessary number of air–force officers having suitable qualifications is not, with due regard to the public service, available, he may appoint as any member of the court (but not as its president) any naval or military officer of corresponding rank to that required for an air–force officer.

(9) In this section—

"air–force officer" means an officer belonging to Her Majesty's air forces and subject to air–force law;

"military officer" means an officer belonging to Her Majesty's military forces and subject to military law; and

"naval officer" means an officer belonging to Her Majesty's naval forces and subject to the Naval Discipline Act 1957."

36. Section 85(3) shall cease to have effect.

37. Sections 86 to 90 shall cease to have effect.

38.—(1) Section 91 (place for sitting of court–martial and adjournment to other places) shall be amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (1)—

(a) for the words "Her Majesty's dominions" there shall be substituted the words "the United Kingdom"; and

(b) the words from "and the convening officer" to the end shall cease to have effect.

(3) In subsection (2), for the words from "shall" to "direction" there shall be substituted the word "may".

39.—(1) Section 92 (challenges by accused to members of court–martial) shall be amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (1), for the word "officer" there shall be substituted the word "member".

(3) In subsection (2)—

(a) for the word "they" there shall be substituted the words "the officers appointed members"; and

(b) for the words "those officers" there shall be substituted the words "the members".

(4) In subsection (3)—

(a) for the word "officer" there shall be substituted the word "member"; and

(b) for the words from "considered" to the end there shall be substituted the words "determined by the judge advocate".

(5) In subsection (4)—

(a) for the words from "objection" to "it" there shall be substituted the words "an objection to the president is allowed"; and

(b) for the word "convening" there shall be substituted the words "court administration".

(6) In subsection (5)—

(a) for the words from "objection" to "it" there shall be substituted the words "an objection to any other officer appointed a member of the court is allowed";

(b) for the word "member" in the second place it appears there shall be substituted the word "officer"; and

(c) for the word "members" in the second place it appears there shall be substituted the word "officers".

(7) After subsection (5) there shall be added the following subsection—

"(6) If an objection to the judge advocate is allowed, the judge advocate shall retire and another judge advocate shall be appointed by or on behalf of the Judge Advocate General."

40.—(1) Section 93 (administration of oaths) shall be amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (1)—

(a) after the word "every" there shall be inserted the words "officer appointed a"; and

(b) the words "other than an exempted person" and "judge advocate" shall cease to have effect.

(3) Subsection (1A) shall cease to have effect.

41. In section 94 (courts–martial to sit in open court), after subsection (5) there shall be added the following subsections—

"(6) The judge advocate shall not be present while the other members of the court are deliberating on their finding on any charge.

(7) Any ruling or direction of the judge advocate on a question of law (including a question of procedure or practice) shall be given in open court.

(8) The judge advocate may determine, and give rulings on, questions of law (including questions of procedure and practice) in the absence of the other members of the court and of any officers and other persons under instruction."

42.—(1) Section 95 (dissolution of courts–martial) shall be amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (1)—

(a) for the words "whether before or after" there shall be substituted the word "before"; and

(b) for the word "convening" in both places it appears there shall be substituted the words "court administration".

(3) After subsection (1) there shall be inserted the following subsection—

"(1A) Where, after the commencement of the trial, it appears to the judge advocate necessary or expedient in the interests of the administration of justice that a court–martial should be dissolved, he may by order dissolve the court–martial."

(4) In subsection (3), for the words "convening officer" there shall be substituted the words "judge advocate".

(5) Subsection (4) shall cease to have effect.

43.—(1) Section 96 (decisions of courts–martial) shall be amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (1), for the words from "every" to "court–martial" there shall be substituted the words "the finding of a court–martial and any sentence awarded".

(3) After subsection (1) there shall be inserted the following subsection—

"(1A) The judge advocate shall not be entitled to vote on the finding."

(4) In subsection (3)—

(a) after the word "court" in the second place it appears there shall be inserted the words "entitled to vote on the finding"; and

(b) for the words "the members" in the second place they appear there shall be substituted the words "those members".

(5) In subsection (5), the words from "or on" to "finding" shall cease to have effect.

44. In section 97(3) (sentence of court–martial to be announced in open court) after the word "mercy" there shall be inserted the words "and any reasons for the sentence".

45.—(1) Section 99 (rules of evidence) shall be amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (1)—

(a) for the words "civil courts" there shall be substituted the words "trials on indictment"; and

(b) for the words "before a civil court" there shall be substituted the words "in a trial on indictment".

(3) In subsection (3), for the words "civil court" there shall be substituted the words "trial on indictment".

46. For section 103 there shall be substituted the following section—

"Rules

103.—(1) The Secretary of State may make rules with respect to—

(a) the investigation, prosecution and trial of, and awarding of punishment for, offences cognizable by courts–martial;

(b) the review of findings and sentences of courts–martial.

(2) Rules under this section may in particular make provision with respect to—

(a) proceedings preliminary to trials by general or district courts–martial;

(b) the appointment of a judge advocate for any preliminary proceedings;

(c) the delegation by court administration officers of any of their functions;

(d) the convening and constitution of general and district courts–martial;

(e) the sittings, adjournment and dissolution of general and district courts–martial;

(f) the procedure to be followed in trials by general and district courts–martial;

(g) the representation of the accused at such trials and any preliminary proceedings;

(h) procuring the attendance of witnesses at such trials and any preliminary proceedings;

(i) enabling a general or district court–martial, in such cases and to such extent as may be prescribed, to amend a charge which is being tried by the court;

(j) enabling a general or district court–martial, where the particulars proved or admitted at the trial differ from those alleged in the charge but are sufficient to support a finding of guilty of the like offence as that charged, to make a finding of guilty subject to exceptions or variations specified in the finding if it appears to the court that the difference is not so material as to have prejudiced the accused in his defence;

(k) directing that the powers conferred by section 7 of the Bankers' Books Evidence Act 1879 (which enables orders to be made for the inspection of bankers' books for the purposes of legal proceedings) may be exercised for the purposes of a general or district court–martial (whether within or without the United Kingdom) by the commanding officer of the accused or a judge advocate as well as by the court or a judge within the meaning of that Act;

(l) the forms of orders and other documents to be made for the purposes of any provision of this Act or of rules under this section;

(m) the cases in which, and extent to which, offences may be taken into consideration by a general or district court–martial and the powers of the court in relation to any offences taken into consideration;

(n) the recording of the proceedings of a general or district court–martial;

(o) the procedure to be followed on review of findings and sentences of general or district courts–martial.

(3) Rules made by virtue of paragraph (i) of subsection (2) above shall secure that the power to amend charges is not exercisable in circumstances substantially different from those in which indictments are amendable by a civil court in England, or otherwise than subject to the like conditions, as nearly as circumstances admit, as those subject to which indictments are so amendable.

(4) A rule under this section which is inconsistent with the provisions of this Act shall to the extent of the inconsistency be void.

(5) Rules under this section shall be made by statutory instrument which shall be subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament."

47. After section 103 there shall be inserted the following sections—

"Field General Courts–Martial

103A.—(1) Where an officer to whom this subsection applies—

(a) is commanding a body of the regular air force on active service; and

(b) is of opinion that it is not possible without serious detriment to the public service for a charge against a member of that body to be tried by a general or district court–martial,

he may direct that the charge be tried by a field general court–martial.

(2) Subsection (1) above applies to—

(a) the commanding officer who has investigated the charge;

(b) the commanding officer or appropriate superior authority who has determined on a summary dealing that the charge against the accused has been proved, in a case where the accused has elected court–martial trial and that election has not been withdrawn;

(c) where the charge is against an officer or warrant officer, the higher authority to whom the charge has been referred by the commanding officer.

(3) If an officer to whom subsection (1) above applies directs that a charge be tried by a field general court–martial, he shall by order convene a field general court–martial.

(4) The order convening the field general court–martial shall specify—

(a) the date, time and place at which the court–martial is to sit;

(b) the officers who are to be members of the court–martial;

(c) which of those officers is to be president of the court–martial.

(5) At any time before the commencement of the trial, the officer who convened the field general court–martial may, in accordance with rules under section 103C of this Act, amend or withdraw the order convening the court–martial.

(6) Subject to subsection (7) below, the officer convening the field general court–martial shall not be a member of the court–martial.

(7) The officer convening the field general court–martial may be its president if, in his opinion, it is not possible, without serious detriment to the public service, to appoint another officer as president.

Constitution of field general courts martial

103B.—(1) Subject to subsections (2) and (3) below, a field general court–martial shall consist of the president and not less than two other air–force officers.

(2) If the officer who convened the field general court–martial is of opinion that three air–force officers having suitable qualifications are not available without serious detriment to the public service, the field general court–martial shall consist of the president and one other air–force officer.

(3) Unless the officer convening the field general court–martial is of opinion that a judge advocate is not available without serious detriment to the public service, a judge advocate shall be a member of the court–martial.

(4) In subsection (3) above, "a judge advocate" means a judge advocate appointed by or on behalf of the Judge Advocate General or, if the officer convening the field general court–martial is of opinion that no such judge advocate is available without serious detriment to the public service, a qualified officer appointed by that officer.

(5) An officer is "qualified" for the purposes of subsection (4) above if he is—

(a) a person who has a general qualification within the meaning of section 71 of the Courts and Legal Services Act 1990;

(b) an advocate or solicitor in Scotland; or

(c) a member of the Bar of Northern Ireland or a solicitor of the Supreme Court of Northern Ireland.

(6) The president of a field general court–martial shall not be below the rank of flight lieutenant.

(7) If a field general court–martial is to be convened at any place where in the opinion of the officer convening it the necessary number of air–force officers having suitable qualifications is not available to form the court, and cannot be made available without serious detriment to the public service, the officer may appoint as any member of the court (but not as its president) any naval or military officer of corresponding rank to that required for an air–force officer.

(8) A field general court–martial shall have the powers of a general court–martial except that where less than three officers are members of the court the sentence shall not exceed imprisonment for a term of two years or detention under section 71AA of this Act for a period of two years.

(9) In this section—

"air–force officer" means an officer belonging to Her Majesty's air forces and subject to air–force law;

"military officer" means an officer belonging to Her Majesty's military forces and subject to military law; and

"naval officer" means an officer belonging to Her Majesty's naval forces and subject to the Naval Discipline Act 1957.

Field General Court Martial Rules

103C.—(1) The Secretary of State may by statutory instrument make rules with respect to field general courts–martial.

(2) Rules under this section may in particular—

(a) provide for any provision of this Act relating to general or district courts–martial or the proceedings of such courts–martial to apply to field general courts–martial or the proceedings of such courts–martial with the necessary modifications;

(b) make any provision with respect to field general courts–martial which may be made with respect to general and district courts–martial by rules under section 103 of this Act."

48. Sections 104 to 106 shall cease to have effect.

Naval Discipline Act 1957 (c. 53)

49. The Naval Discipline Act 1957 shall be amended as follows.

50. Section 53 shall cease to have effect.

51. After section 53 there shall be inserted the following sections—

"Court administration officers

53A. In this Act—

"court administration officer" means an officer (or other person) appointed by the Defence Council to order courts–martial and perform such other functions as may be prescribed by rules under section 58 of this Act; and

"the court administration officer", in relation to a court–martial, means the court administration officer who ordered the court–martial and includes his successor or any person for the time being exercising his or his successor's functions.

Judge advocates

53B.—(1) In this Act "the judge advocate", in relation to a court–martial, means the judge advocate appointed by or on behalf of the Chief Naval Judge Advocate to be a member of the court–martial.

(2) No person shall be appointed as the judge advocate unless he is—

(a) a person who has a five year general qualification within the meaning of section 71 of the Courts and Legal Services Act 1990;

(b) an advocate in Scotland of at least five years' standing or a solicitor who has had a right of audience in the Court of Session or the High Court of Justiciary for at least five years; or

(c) a member of the Bar of Northern Ireland of at least five years' standing.

(3) Rulings and directions on questions of law (including questions of procedure and practice) shall be given by the judge advocate.

(4) Any directions given by the judge advocate shall be binding on the court.

Ordering of courts martial

53C.—(1) On being notified by the prosecuting authority of the charge preferred, a court administration officer shall order a court–martial.

(2) The order assembling the court–martial shall specify—

(a) the date, time and place at which the court–martial is to sit;

(b) the officers who are to be members of the court–martial;

(c) which of those officers is to be president of the court–martial;

(d) any other officers appointed for the purpose of filling vacancies,

and shall state that a judge advocate appointed by or on behalf of the Chief Naval Judge Advocate is to be a member of the court–martial.

(3) At any time before the commencement of the trial, the court administration officer may, in accordance with rules under section 58 of this Act, amend or withdraw the order assembling the court–martial.

(4) The following shall not be eligible to be members of the court–martial for the trial of a charge—

(a) the court administration officer;

(b) an officer who at any time between the date on which the preliminary charge was reported to the commanding officer of the accused and the date of the trial has been the commanding officer of the accused;

(c) the higher authority to whom the preliminary charge against the accused was referred;

(d) any other officer who has investigated the subject matter of the charge against the accused;

(e) any other officer who under this Act has held, or has acted as one of the persons holding, an inquiry into matters relating to the subject matter of the charge against the accused.

(5) In subsection (4) above "the preliminary charge" means the charge referred to higher authority by the commanding officer of the accused."

52. For section 54 there shall be substituted the following section—

"Composition of courts martial

54.—(1) A court–martial shall consist of the president, not less than four nor more than eight other naval officers and the judge advocate.

(2) An officer shall not be appointed a member of a court–martial unless he is of or above the rank of lieutenant and he has been an officer of any of Her Majesty's naval, military or air forces for a period of not less than three years or for periods amounting in the aggregate to not less than three years.

(3) The officers appointed members of a court–martial shall not all belong to the same ship or naval establishment.

(4) The president of a court–martial shall not be below the rank of captain, and in the case of a court–martial for the trial of an officer of flag rank shall be an officer of flag rank.

(5) A court–martial for the trial of an officer of flag rank shall not include any member below the rank of captain.

(6) A court–martial for the trial of a commodore or captain shall not include any member below the rank of commander.

(7) A court–martial for the trial of a commander shall include at least two members, in addition to the president, who are not below the rank of commander.

(8) If, in the opinion of the court administration officer, the necessary number of naval officers having suitable qualifications is not, with due regard to the public service, available, he may appoint as any member of the court (but not as its president) any military or air–force officer of corresponding rank to that required for a naval officer.

(9) In this section—

"air–force officer" means an officer belonging to Her Majesty's air forces and subject to air–force law;

"military officer" means an officer belonging to Her Majesty's military forces and subject to military law; and

"naval officer" means an officer belonging to Her Majesty's naval forces and subject to this Act."

53. Section 55 shall cease to have effect.

54.—(1) Section 56 (place and time of sittings of courts–martial) shall be amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (1), for the words from "appointed" to the end there shall be substituted the words "specified in the order assembling the court".

(3) In subsection (2), the words from "and shall" to the end shall cease to have effect.

(4) In subsection (3), for the word "prosecutor" there shall be substituted the words "prosecuting authority".

55. After section 56 there shall be inserted the following section—

"Dissolution of courts martial

56A.—(1) Where, before the commencement of the trial, it appears to the court administration officer necessary or expedient in the interests of the administration of justice that a court–martial be dissolved, he may by order dissolve the court–martial.

(2) Where, after the commencement of the trial, it appears to the judge advocate necessary or expedient in the interests of the administration of justice that a court–martial be dissolved, he may by order dissolve the court–martial.

(3) If after the commencement of the trial the president dies or is otherwise unable to attend, the court–martial shall be dissolved.

(4) Where a court–martial is dissolved the accused may be tried by another court."

56.—(1) Section 57 (quorum) shall be amended as follows.

(2) Subsections (1) and (3) shall cease to have effect.

(3) In subsection (2)—

(a) for the word "members" in both places it appears there shall be substituted the word "officers"; and

(b) after the word "that" there shall be inserted the words "an officer appointed".

57. For section 58 there shall be substituted the following section—

"Rules

58.—(1) The Secretary of State may make rules with respect to—

(a) the investigation, prosecution and trial of, and the awarding of punishment for, offences cognizable by courts–martial;

(b) the review of findings and sentences of courts–martial.

(2) Rules under this section may in particular make provision with respect to—

(a) proceedings preliminary to trials by courts–martial;

(b) the appointment of a judge advocate for any preliminary proceedings;

(c) the delegation by court administration officers of any of their functions;

(d) the ordering and composition of courts–martial;

(e) the sittings, adjournment and dissolution of courts–martial;

(f) the procedure to be followed in trials by courts–martial;

(g) the functions of the clerk of the court and the exercise by him of those functions;

(h) the representation of the accused at trials by courts–martial and any preliminary proceedings;

(i) procuring the attendance of witnesses at such trials and any preliminary proceedings;

(j) enabling a court–martial, in such cases and to such extent as may be prescribed by the rules, to amend a charge which is being tried by the court;

(k) enabling a court–martial, where the particulars proved or admitted at the trial differ from those alleged in the charge but are sufficient to support a finding of guilty of the like offence as that charged, to make a finding of guilty subject to exceptions or variations specified in the finding if it appears to the court that the difference is not so material as to have prejudiced the accused in his defence;

(l) directing that the powers conferred by section 7 of the Bankers' Books Evidence Act 1879 (which enables orders to be made for the inspection of bankers' books for the purposes of legal proceedings) may be exercised for the purposes of a court–martial (whether within or without the United Kingdom) by the commanding officer of the accused or a judge advocate, as well as by the court or a judge within the meaning of that Act;

(m) the forms of orders and other documents to be made for the purposes of any provision of this Act or of rules under this section;

(n) the cases in which, and extent to which, offences may be taken into consideration by a court–martial and the powers of the court in relation to any offences taken into consideration;

(o) the recording of the proceedings of a court–martial;

(p) the procedure to be followed on review of findings and sentences of courts–martial.

(3) Rules made by virtue of paragraph (j) of subsection (2) above shall secure that the power to amend charges is not exercisable in circumstances substantially different from those in which indictments are amendable by a civil court in England, or otherwise than subject to the like conditions, as nearly as circumstances admit, as those subject to which indictments are so amendable.

(4) Rules under this section which are inconsistent with the provisions of this Act shall to the extent of the inconsistency be void.

(5) Rules under this section shall be made by statutory instrument which shall be subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament."

58.—(1) Section 59 (challenges by accused to members of court–martial) shall be amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (1)—

(a) after the words "Before the" there shall be inserted the words "officers appointed";

(b) for the words "officers constituting" there shall be substituted the words "members of"; and

(c) for the words from "being" to the end there shall be substituted the words "any of those members".

(3) In subsection (2)—

(a) for the word "officer" there shall be substituted the word "member"; and

(b) for the words from "considered" to the end there shall be substituted the words "determined by the judge advocate".

(4) For subsection (3) there shall be substituted the following subsection—

"(3) If an objection to the president is allowed, the court shall be dissolved."

(5) In subsection (4)—

(a) for the words from "objection" to "the member" there shall be substituted the words "an objection to any other officer appointed a member of the court is allowed";

(b) for the word "nominated" there shall be substituted the word "appointed"; and

(c) for the words "section fifty–four" there shall be substituted the words "section 53C".

(6) After subsection (4) there shall be inserted the following subsection—

"(4A) If an objection to the judge advocate is allowed, the judge advocate shall retire and another judge advocate shall be appointed by or on behalf of the Chief Naval Judge Advocate."

(7) Subsection (5) shall cease to have effect.

(8) In subsection (6)—

(a) after the words "After the" there shall be inserted the words "officers appointed"; and

(b) for the words "Defence Council" there shall be substituted the words "reviewing authority".

59.—(1) Section 60 (administration of oaths) shall be amended as follows.

(2) For subsection (1) there shall be substituted the following subsection—

"(1) An oath shall be administered separately to each member of a court–martial, to the clerk of the court and any officer or other person in attendance for instruction, and to any person appointed to attend as interpreter."

(3) In subsection (5), for the words "General Orders" there shall be substituted the word "rules".

60. In section 61 (courts–martial to sit in open court), after subsection (2) there shall be added the following subsections—

"(3) A court–martial shall sit in closed court while deliberating on their finding and sentence on any charge.

(4) A court–martial may sit in closed court on any other deliberation amongst the members.

(5) Where a court–martial sits in closed court no person shall be present except the members of the court and such other persons as may be prescribed by rules under section 58 of this Act.

(6) The judge advocate shall not be present while the other members of the court are deliberating on their finding on any charge.

(7) Any ruling or direction of the judge advocate on a question of law (including a question of procedure or practice) shall be given in open court.

(8) The judge advocate may determine, and give rulings on, questions of law (including questions of procedure and practice) in the absence of the other members of the court."

61.—(1) Section 62 (findings and sentences of courts–martial) shall be amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (1), for the words from "every" to "court–martial" there shall be substituted the words "the finding of a court–martial and any sentence awarded".

(3) After subsection (1) there shall be inserted the following subsection—

"(1A) The judge advocate shall not be entitled to vote on the finding."

(4) In subsection (3), after the word "mercy" there shall be inserted the words "and any reasons for the sentence".

(5) In subsection (4)—

(a) after the word "court" in the second place it appears there shall be inserted the words "entitled to vote on the finding"; and

(b) for the words "the members" in the second place they appear there shall be substituted the words "those members".

62. In section 64(1) (summoning of witnesses), for the words "clerk of the court" there shall be substituted the words "court administration officer".

63. After section 64 there shall be inserted the following sections—

"Rules of evidence

64A.—(1) The rules as to the admissibility of evidence to be observed in proceedings before courts–martial shall, subject to Schedule 13 to the Criminal Justice Act 1988 (evidence before courts–martial etc) and to service modifications, be the same as those observed in trials on indictment in England, and no person shall be required in proceedings before a court–martial to answer any question or to produce any document which he could not be required to answer or produce in similar proceedings in a trial on indictment in England.

(2) In this section "service modifications" means such modifications as the Secretary of State may by regulations made by statutory instrument prescribe, being modifications which appear to him to be necessary or proper for the purposes of proceedings before a court–martial; and it is hereby declared that in this section—

"rules" includes rules contained in or made by virtue of an enactment; and

"enactment" includes an enactment contained in an Act passed after this Act.

(3) Regulations under subsection (2) above shall be subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament.

(4) A court–martial shall take judicial notice of all matters of notoriety, including all matters within the general service knowledge of the court, and of all other matters of which judicial notice would be taken in a trial on indictment in England.

Proofs at courts martial by written statement

64B.—(1) Without prejudice to section 64A above, section 9 of the Criminal Justice Act 1967 (proof by written statement) shall apply subject to subsection (2) below and to service modifications, for the purposes of proceedings before courts–martial (whether held in the United Kingdom or not) as it applies to proceedings on indictment.

(2) The statements rendered admissible by this section are statements made—

(a) in the United Kingdom by any person, and

(b) outside the United Kingdom by any person who at the time of making the statement was—

(i) a person subject to service law, or

(ii) a person to whom Parts I and II of this Act are applied by section 117 or section 118 of this Act, or to whom Part II of the Army Act 1955 or Part II of the Air Force Act 1955 is applied by section 208A or section 209 of the Army Act 1955 or the Air Force Act 1955 respectively,

and the persons mentioned in this paragraph include persons to whom section 119 of this Act, section 131 of the Army Act 1955 or section 131 of the Air Force Act 1955 apply.

(3) In subsection (1) above "service modifications" means—

(a) modifications made by any regulations under section 12 of the Criminal Justice Act 1967 in force on the coming into force of this section, and

(b) such modifications in the said section 9, as applied by subsection (1) above, as the Secretary of State may by regulations made by statutory instrument prescribe thereafter, being modifications which appear to him to be necessary or proper for the purpose of the operation of that section in relation to proceedings before a court–martial.

(4) Regulations under subsection (3)(b) above shall be subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament.

(5) Section 89 of the said Act of 1967 (punishment of making false statements tendered under section 9) shall apply to any statement rendered admissible by this section.

Proof of service facts and records

64C.—(1) This section applies with respect to proceedings before a court–martial.

(2) A letter, return or other document stating that any person—

(a) was or was not serving at any specified time or during any specified period in any part of Her Majesty's forces;

(b) was discharged from any part of those forces at or before any specified time;

(c) held or did not hold at any specified time any specified rank or appointment in any of those forces;

(d) had at or before any specified time been attached, posted or transferred to any part of those forces;

(e) at any specified time or during any specified time was or was not serving or held or did not hold any rank or appointment in any particular country or place; or

(f) was or was not at any specified time authorised to use or wear any decoration, badge or emblem;

shall if purporting to be issued by or on behalf of the Defence Council or by a person authorised by them, be evidence of the matter stated in the document.

(3) A record—

(a) made in any service record in pursuance of any Act or of Queen's Regulations, or otherwise in pursuance of naval duty; and

(b) purporting to be signed by the commanding officer or by any person whose duty it was to make or keep the records,

may be received without formal proof in all trials under this Act as prima facie evidence of the record.

(4) A copy of a record (including the signature thereto) such as is mentioned in subsection (3) above, purporting to be certified to be a true copy by a person stated in the certificate

to have the custody of the record, may be received without formal proof in all trials under this Act as prima facie evidence of the record.

(5) A document purporting to be issued by order of the Defence Council and to contain instructions given or regulations made by the Defence Council shall be evidence of the giving of the instructions or making of the regulations and of their contents.

(6) A certificate purporting to be issued by or on behalf of the Defence Council or by a person authorised by them, and stating—

(a) that a decoration of a description specified in or, as annexed to the certificate is a military, naval or air force decoration; or

(b) that a badge or emblem of a description specified in or, as annexed to the certificate is one supplied or authorised by the Defence Council;

shall be evidence of the matters stated in the certificate.

(7) A certificate purporting to be signed by a person's commanding officer or any officer authorised by him to give the certificate, and stating the contents of, or of any part of, standing orders or other routine orders of a continuing nature made for—

(a) any ship, train or aircraft;

(b) any formation or unit or body of Her Majesty's forces; or

(c) any command or other area, or place;

shall in proceedings against that person be evidence of the matters stated in the certificate.

(8) Any document which would be evidence in any proceedings under the Army Act 1955 or the Air Force Act 1955 shall in like manner, subject to the like conditions, and for the like purposes, be evidence in a court–martial under this Act.

Privilege of witnesses and others at courtsmartial

64D. A witness before a court–martial or any other person whose duty it is to attend on or before the court shall be entitled to the same immunities and privileges as a witness before the High Court in England."

PART IV

MINOR AND CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS

Courts-Martial (Appeals) Act 1951 (c. 46)

64. In section 28(2) of the Courts-Martial (Appeals) Act 1951 (qualification for appointment as Judge Advocate of Her Majesty's Fleet), in paragraph (b), for the words from "been" to "and" there shall be substituted the words "had a right of audience in the Court of Session or".

65. In section 31 of that Act (qualification for appointment as Judge Advocate General and his assistants), in paragraph (b) in each of subsections (1), (2) and (3), for the words from "been" to "and" there shall be substituted the words "had a right of audience in the Court of Session or".

Army Act 1955 (c. 18)

66. The Army Act 1955 shall be amended as follows.

67. In section 134 (persons not to be tried under Act for offences already disposed of), in subsection (1)(b), for the words "been found guilty on the charge" there shall be substituted the words "had a finding that the charge has been proved recorded against him".

68. Section 139 shall cease to have effect.

69. In section 143(1) (interpretation of Part II)—

(a) the definition of "convening officer" shall cease to have effect; and

(b) in the definition of "prescribed", for the words "Rules of Procedure" there shall be substituted the words "rules under section 103 of this Act".

70. In section 198 (general provisions as to evidence), in subsection (9), after the words "that Act" there shall be inserted the words ", or in any proceedings under the Naval Discipline Act 1957, by virtue of section 64C of that Act,".

71. In section 209(3) (modifications of Act in relation to trial of civilians by courts–martial)—

(a) paragraph (d) shall cease to have effect;

(b) in paragraph (fa), the words "constituted under section 87 above" and "constituted under section 88 above" shall cease to have effect; and

(c) after paragraph (fa) there shall be inserted the following paragraph—

"(faa) references to the officers appointed members of a court–martial shall be construed as including references to persons who are members of a court–martial by virtue of paragraph (fa) above;".

72.—(1) Section 209(3B) (modifications of Act in its application to any area for which Standing Civilian Courts are established) shall be amended as follows.

(2) After paragraph (a) there shall be inserted the following paragraph—

"(aa) section 83 above shall have effect as if after subsection (1) there were inserted the following subsection—

"(1A) Regulations under this section may provide for sections 76 to 76C of this Act to have effect subject to such modifications as may be specified in relation to charges which may be tried by Standing Civilian Courts and which are brought against persons whom such courts may try.";"

(3) For paragraph (b) there shall be substituted the following paragraph—

"(b) section 103(1) above shall have effect as if the following paragraph were inserted after paragraph (b)—

"(c) the hearing by courts–martial of appeals against findings and sentences of Standing Civilian Courts.";"

(4) In paragraph (c)—

(a) for "77, 79 and 80" there shall be substituted "to 76C"; and

(b) for the words from "consequential" to "Procedure" there shall be substituted the words "as may be specified by regulations under section 83 of this Act".

73. In section 211 (application of Act to reserve forces), in subsection (7), for the words "subsection (3) of section seventy–eight" there shall be substituted the words "section 76C(2)".

74. In section 225(1) (general provisions as to interpretation of Act)—

(a) in the definition of "appropriate superior authority" for the words from "has" to "and" there shall be substituted the words "means a person who may act as an appropriate superior authority by virtue of";

(b) after the definition of "corresponding rank" there shall be inserted the following definition—

"court administration officer" and "the court administration officer" have the meanings assigned to them by section 84A of this Act;";

(c) after the definition of "Her Majesty's air forces", "Her Majesty's military forces" and "Her Majesty's naval forces" there shall be inserted the following definition—

"the judge advocate" has the meaning assigned to it by section 84B(1) of this Act;";

(d) after the definition of "property" there shall be inserted the following definition—

"the prosecuting authority" has the meaning assigned to it by section 83A(1) of this Act;"; and

(e) the definition of "Rules of Procedure" shall cease to have effect.

75. In Schedule 5A (powers of court on trial of civilian), in paragraphs 13(2)(a) and 14(6)(a), for the words "Rules of Procedure" there shall be substituted the word "rules".

Air Force Act 1955 (c. 19)

76. The Air Force Act 1955 shall be amended as follows.

77. In section 134 (persons not to be tried under Act for offences already disposed of), in subsection (1)(b), for the words "been found guilty on the charge" there shall be substituted the words "had a finding that the charge has been proved recorded against him".

78. Section 139 shall cease to have effect.

79. In section 143(1) (interpretation of Part II)—

(a) the definition of "convening officer" shall cease to have effect; and

(b) in the definition of "prescribed", for the words "Rules of Procedure" there shall be substituted the words "rules under section 103 of this Act".

80. In section 198 (general provisions as to evidence), in subsection (9), after the words "that Act" there shall be inserted the words ", or in any proceedings under the Naval Discipline Act 1957, by virtue of section 64C of that Act,".

81. In section 209(3) (modifications of Act in relation to trial of civilians by courts–martial)—

(a) paragraph (d) shall cease to have effect;

(b) in paragraph (fa), the words "constituted under section 87 above" and "constituted under section 88 above" shall cease to have effect; and

(c) after paragraph (fa) there shall be inserted the following paragraph—

"(faa) references to the officers appointed members of a court–martial shall be construed as including references to persons who are members of a court–martial by virtue of paragraph (fa) above;".

82.—(1) Section 209(3B) (modifications of Act in its application to any area for which Standing Civilian Courts are established) shall be amended as follows.

(2) After paragraph (a) there shall be inserted the following paragraph—

"(aa) section 83 above shall have effect as if after subsection (1) there were inserted the following subsection—

"(1A) Regulations under this section may provide for sections 76 to 76C of this Act to have effect subject to such modifications as may be specified in relation to charges which may be tried by Standing Civilian Courts and which are brought against persons whom such courts may try.";"

(3) For paragraph (b) there shall be substituted the following paragraph—

"(b) section 103(1) above shall have effect as if the following paragraph were inserted after paragraph (b)—

"(c) the hearing by courts–martial of appeals against findings and sentences of Standing Civilian Courts.";"

(4) In paragraph (c)—

(a) for "77, 79 and 80" there shall be substituted "to 76C"; and

(b) for the words from "consequential" to "Procedure" there shall be substituted the words "as may be specified by regulations under section 83 of this Act".

83. In section 210 (application of Act to reserve forces), in subsection (7), for the words "subsection (3) of section seventy–eight" there shall be substituted the words "section 76C(2)".

84. In section 223(1) (general provisions as to interpretation of Act)—

(a) in the definition of "appropriate superior authority" for the words from "has" to "and" there shall be substituted the words "means a person who may act as an appropriate superior authority by virtue of";

(b) after the definition of "corresponding rank" there shall be inserted the following definition—

"court administration officer" and "the court administration officer" have the meanings assigned to them by section 84A of this Act;";

(c) after the definition of "Her Majesty's air forces", "Her Majesty's military forces" and "Her Majesty's naval forces" there shall be inserted the following definition—

"the judge advocate", in relation to a court–martial, has the meaning assigned to it by section 84B(1) of this Act;";

(d) after the definition of "property" there shall be inserted the following definition—

"the prosecuting authority" has the meaning assigned to it by section 83A(1) of this Act;"; and

(e) the definition of "Rules of Procedure" shall cease to have effect.

85. In Schedule 5A (powers of court on trial of civilian), in paragraphs 13(2)(a) and 14(6)(a), for the words "Rules of Procedure" there shall be substituted the word "rules".

Naval Discipline Act 1957 (c. 53)

86. The Naval Discipline Act 1957 shall be amended as follows.

87. In section 65(4) (contempt of court–martial by civilians), for the words "subsection (5) of section fifty" there shall be substituted the words "section 52G(9)".

88. In section 66(1) (record of proceedings of court–martial) for the words from "judge" to "it" there shall be substituted the words "court administration officer shall transmit the record of the proceedings".

89. In section 76 (restitution or compensation on conviction of larceny etc.)—

(a) in subsection (6)(a), the words from "by the officer" to the end shall cease to have effect; and

(b) in subsection (6)(b), for the words "section forty–nine" there shall be substituted the words "section 52D".

90. In section 81 (place of imprisonment or detention)—

(a) in subsection (3)(c) for the words "officer who ordered the court–martial" there shall be substituted the words "court–martial by which he is tried"; and

(b) in subsection (3)(d) for the words "section forty–nine" there shall be substituted the words "section 52D".

91. In section 85(2) (commencement of sentences) for the words "section forty–nine" there shall be substituted the words "section 52D".

92. In section 103(1) (arrest under warrants of naval authorities) for the words from "subsection (4)" to the end there shall be substituted the words "regulations under section 52E(2)(a) above may exercise the powers of that person's commanding officer".

93. In section 129(1) (jurisdiction of civil courts) for the words "section forty–nine" there shall be substituted the words "section 52D".

94. In section 135(1) (general provisions as to interpretation of Act)—

(a) after the definition of "civil prison" there shall be inserted the following definition—

"the commanding officer", in relation to a person charged with an offence, has the meaning assigned to it by section 52E(1) of this Act;";

(b) after the definition of "constable" there shall be inserted the following definition—

"court administration officer" and "the court administration officer" have the meanings assigned to them by section 53A of this Act;";

(c) after the definition of "Her Majesty's forces" there shall be inserted the following definition—

"the judge advocate", in relation to a court–martial, has the meaning assigned to it by section 53B(1) of this Act;": and

(d) after the definition of "property" there shall be inserted the following definition—

"the prosecuting authority" has the meaning assigned to it by section 52H(1) of this Act;".

95. In Schedule 1 (application of Act to marine forces), in paragraph 3, for the words "section forty–nine" there shall be substituted the words "section 52D".

96. In Schedule 2 (application of Act to attached military and air forces)—

(a) in paragraph 6, for the words "section forty–nine" there shall be substituted the words "section 52D"; and

(b) in paragraph 7, for the words "section fifty" there shall be substituted the words "section 52G" and for the words "subsection (3)" there shall be substituted the words "subsection (5)".

97. In Schedule 4 (application of Act to certain civilians), in paragraph 4—

(a) for the words "section forty–nine" in both places there shall be substituted the words "section 52D"; and

(b) the words from "and subsections" to "not apply" shall cease to have effect.

98. In Schedule 4A (powers of court on trial of civilian), in paragraphs 13(2)(a) and 14(6)(a), for the words "General Orders" there shall be substituted the word "rules".

Criminal Justice Act 1967 (c. 80)

99. In section 12 of the Criminal Justice Act 1967 (application to courts–martial of certain provisions relating to admissibility of evidence)—

(a) after the words "Air Force Act 1955" in the first place they appear there shall be inserted the words ", or section 64A(1) of the Naval Discipline Act 1957,"; and

(b) for paragraphs (a) and (b) there shall be substituted the words "sections 10 and 11 above shall apply to proceedings before courts–martial".

Civil Evidence Act 1968 (c. 64)

100. In section 11 of the Civil Evidence Act 1968 (convictions as evidence in civil proceedings), in subsection (6), for the words "section 50" there shall be substituted the words "section 52G".

Civil Evidence Act (Northern Ireland) 1971 (c. 36 (N.I.))

101. In section 7 of the Civil Evidence Act (Northern Ireland) 1971 (convictions as evidence in civil proceedings), in subsection (6), for the words "section 50" there shall be substituted the words "section 52G".

Armed Forces Act 1976 (c. 52)

102. In section 6 of the Armed Forces Act 1976 (establishment of Standing Civilian Courts), in subsection (15), for the words "authority who directs the trial or trials" there shall be substituted the words "court administration officer notified by the prosecuting authority that the trial or trials are".

103.—(1) Schedule 3 to that Act (Standing Civilian Courts) shall be amended as follows.

(2) In paragraph 1 (interpretation)—

(a) after the definition of "the court" there shall be inserted the following definitions—

"court administration officer" has the same meaning as in the Army Act 1955;

"the court administration officer", in relation to a civilian, means the court administration officer notified by the prosecuting authority that the civilian is to be tried by the court and includes his successor or any person for the time being exercising his or his successor's functions;

"the higher authority", in relation to a civilian, means the higher authority who referred his case to the prosecuting authority;";

(b) the definition of "the directing officer" shall cease to have effect; and

(c) after the definition of "prescribed" there shall be inserted the following definition—

"the prosecuting authority"—

(a) in the case of a civilian to whom Part II of the Army Act 1955 applies, has the same meaning as in that Act;

(b) in the case of a civilian to whom Part II of the Air Force Act 1955 applies, has the same meaning as in that Act;".

(3) In paragraph 2 (sittings of the Standing Civilian Court)—

(a) in sub–paragraphs (1) and (3), for the word "directing" there shall be substituted the words "court administration"; and

(b) in sub–paragraph (2), for the word "shall" there shall be substituted the word "may" and the words from "if so" to "direction" shall cease to have effect.

(4) In paragraph 4 (right of accused to elect trial by court–martial)—

(a) in sub–paragraph (4), for the words from "report" to the end there shall be substituted the words "shall refer the case to the prosecuting authority"; and

(b) sub–paragraph (5) shall cease to have effect.

(5) For paragraph 6 there shall be substituted the following paragraph—

"Unfitness to stand trial and insanity

6.—(1) Where on a trial by the court the question arises (whether at the instance of the defence or otherwise)—

(a) whether the accused is fit to stand trial, or

(b) where it appears to the court that the accused did the act or made the omission constituting the offence with which he is charged, whether he was insane at the time of the act or omission concerned,

the court shall adjourn the hearing and refer the case to the prosecuting authority.

(2) For the purposes of this paragraph a person is unfit to stand trial if he is under a disability such that apart from the Criminal Procedure (Insanity) Act 1964 it would constitute a bar to his being tried on indictment in England and Wales."

(6) Paragraph 7 shall cease to have effect.

(7) In paragraph 8 (re–trial where Standing Civilian Court ceases to be properly constituted)—

(a) in sub–paragraph (1), for the words from the beginning to "directing" there shall be substituted the words "The court administration";

(b) in sub–paragraphs (2) and (3), for the word "directing" there shall be substituted the words "court administration".

(8) In paragraph 12 (procedures etc. of Standing Civilian Court)—

(a) in sub–paragraph (1), after the word "namely" there shall be inserted the following paragraph—

"(aa) the prosecution of offences which may be tried by Standing Civilian Courts;";

(b) after sub–paragraph (4)(b) there shall be inserted the following paragraphs—

"(ba) proceedings preliminary to trials by Standing Civilian Courts;

(bb) the appointment of a magistrate for any preliminary proceedings;";

(c) in sub–paragraph (4)(f), after the word "trials" there shall be inserted the words "and any preliminary proceedings";

(d) in sub–paragraph (4)(h), the words "and the directing officer" shall cease to have effect; and

(e) sub–paragraph (4)(m) shall cease to have effect.

(9) In paragraph 18 (appeals to courts–martial)—

(a) in sub–paragraphs (3) and (4), for the words "directing officer" there shall be substituted the words "higher authority";

(b) in sub–paragraph (4), for the words "Rules of Procedure" there shall be substituted the word "rules"; and

(c) in sub–paragraph (10), the words "or as judge advocate" shall cease to have effect.

(10) In paragraph 20 (review of findings and sentences of Standing Civilian Court), in sub–paragraph (9), for the words "directing officer" there shall be substituted the words "higher authority".

Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (c. 60)

104. The Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 shall be amended as follows.

105. In section 67(12)(a), the definition of "court–martial" in section 82(1) and section 113(11)(a), for the words "section 50" there shall be substituted the words "section 52G".

106. In section 72(1) (meaning of certain expressions used in Part VII), in the definition of "proceedings"—

(a) in paragraph (a), for the words "or the Air Force Act 1955" there shall be substituted the words ", the Air Force Act 1955 or the Naval Discipline Act 1957"; and

(b) in paragraph (b)(i), the words from "or from" to "1957" shall cease to have effect.

107. In section 82(1) (meaning of certain expressions used in Part VIII), in the definition of "proceedings"—

(a) in paragraph (a), for the words "or the Air Force Act 1955" there shall be substituted the words ", the Air Force Act 1955 or the Naval Discipline Act 1957"; and

(b) in paragraph (b)(i), the words from "or from" to "1957" shall cease to have effect.

Criminal Justice Act 1988 (c. 33)

108. In section 146 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 (evidence before courts–martial etc.) for the words "section 50" there shall be substituted the words "section 52G".

109.—(1) Schedule 13 to that Act (evidence before courts–martial etc.) shall be amended as follows.

(2) In paragraph 1 (interpretation)—

(a) for the words "Rules of Procedure" there shall be substituted the word "rules";

(b) for the words "General Orders" there shall be substituted the word "rules"; and

(c) for the words "section 50" there shall be substituted the words "section 52G".

(3) In paragraph 4 (application of section 26 of the Act of 1988)—

(a) for the words "section 77" in both places they appear there shall be substituted the words "section 76B"; and

(b) for the words "section 49" there shall be substituted the words "section 52D".

(4) In paragraph 7 (forms of evidence and glossaries)—

(a) for the words "section 50" there shall be substituted the words "section 52G";

(b) for the words "Rules of Procedure" there shall be substituted the word "rules"; and

(c) for the words "General Orders" there shall be substituted the word "rules".

Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 (S.I. 1989 1341 (N.I. 12))

110. In Article 66(11)(a) of the Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 (codes of practice – supplementary), for the words "section 50" there shall be substituted the words "section 52G".

Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 (c. 33)

111. In section 39 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 (power to apply sections 34 to 38 to armed forces), in subsection (2)(g), for the words "section 50" there shall be substituted the words "section 52G".'.—*[Mr. Soames.]*

Brought up, read the First and Second time, and added to the Bill.

Clauses 5 to 7 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 1

FINDINGS OF UNFITNESS TO STAND TRIAL AND INSANITY

Amendments made: No. 17, in page 27, leave out lines 30 to 41 and insert—

'(2) Subject to subsections (3) and (4) below, the court shall make one of the following orders in respect of the accused, namely—

(a) an admission order;

(b) a guardianship order;

(c) a supervision and treatment order; or

(d) an order discharging him absolutely,

as the court thinks most suitable in all the circumstances of the case.

(3) The court may not make an order under subsection (2)(b), (c) or (d) above if the offence to which the finding relates is an offence the sentence for which is fixed by law.

(4) The court shall not make a guardianship order or a supervision and treatment order unless it has power to do so by virtue of section 116C or section 116D below.

(5) An order under subsection (2)(a), (b) or (c) above shall be treated as if it had been made by a civil court in England and Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland, as the court may direct, and the appropriate mental health legislation shall apply accordingly with such modifications as may be prescribed.'.

No. 18, in page 27, line 42, leave out 'section' and insert 'Act'.

No. 19, in page 27, line 45, at end insert—

'(1A) Where an admission order is made by a court–martial, the court may, in such circumstances as may be prescribed, direct the accused to be treated as if an order restricting his discharge had been made under the appropriate mental health legislation, either without limit of time or (if a civil court would have been permitted to do so under the legislation concerned) during such period as may be specified in the direction.'.

No. 20, in page 28, line 3, leave out from first 'the' to end of line 7 and insert

'appropriate mental health legislation to apply, with such modifications as may be prescribed, in relation to admission orders as the legislation concerned applies in relation to hospital orders;'.

No. 21, in page 28, line 10, at end insert—

'(4) In this section "hospital", "hospital order" and "place of safety" have the same meanings as in the appropriate mental health legislation.'.

No. 22, in page 28, line 11, leave out from beginning to end of line 2 on page 29 and insert—

'Guardianship orders

116C.—(1) In this Act "guardianship order" means an order placing the accused under the guardianship of—

(a) in a case where the order is treated as if it had been made by a civil court in England and Wales, a local social services authority or such other person approved by a local social services authority as may be specified in the order;

(b) in a case where the order is treated as if it had been made by a civil court in Scotland, a local authority or such other person approved by a local authority as may be specified in the order;

(c) in a case where the order is treated as if it had been made by a civil court in Northern Ireland, a Board or an authorised HSS trust or such other person approved by a Board or an authorised HSS trust as may be specified in the order.

(2) In subsection (1) above—

"authorised HSS trust" and "Board" have the same meanings as in the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986;

"local authority" has the same meaning as in the Mental Health (Scotland) Act 1984; and

"local social services authority" has the same meaning as in the Mental Health Act 1983.

(3) A court-martial shall not make a guardianship order unless—

(a) the court is satisfied, on the written or oral evidence of two registered medical practitioners, that—

(i) the accused is suffering from mental illness, psychopathic disorder, severe mental impairment or mental impairment; and

(ii) the mental disorder is of a nature or degree which warrants his reception into guardianship; and

(b) the court is of the opinion, having regard to all the circumstances including the nature of the offence and the character and antecedents of the accused and the other available methods of dealing with him, that the most suitable method of disposing of the case is by means of a guardianship order.

(4) A court-martial shall not make a guardianship order unless it is also satisfied that the authority or other person intended to be specified in the order is willing to receive the accused into guardianship.

(5) A guardianship order shall specify the form or forms of mental disorder referred to in subsection (3)(a) above from which, upon the evidence taken into account under that subsection, the accused is found by the court to be suffering; and a guardianship order shall not be made unless the accused is described by each of the practitioners whose evidence is taken into account under that subsection as suffering from the same one of those forms of mental disorder, whether or not he is also described by either of them as suffering from another of those forms of mental disorder.

(6) The appropriate mental health legislation shall apply, with such modifications as may be prescribed, in relation to guardianship orders under this section as it applies to guardianship orders under the legislation concerned.

(7) In this section "mental disorder", "mental impairment", "psychopathic disorder" and "severe mental impairment" have the same meanings as in the Mental Health Act 1983.'.

No. 23, in page 29, line 3, leave out 'section' and insert 'Act'.

No. 24, in page 30, line 5, leave out from beginning to end of line 9 on page 31 and insert—

'Provisions supplementary to section 115A to 116D

116E.—(1) In this section and sections 115A to 116D above—

"the appropriate mental health legislation" means—

(a) in a case where an order is treated as if it had been made by a civil court in England and Wales, the Mental Health Act 1983;

(b) in a case where an order is treated as if it had been made by a civil court in Scotland, the Mental Health (Scotland) Act 1984 and Part VI of the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995;

(c) in a case where an order is treated as if it had been made by a civil court in Northern Ireland, the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986;

"duly approved" means—

(a) approved for the purposes of section 12 of the Mental Health Act 1983 by the Secretary of State as having special experience in the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorder (within the meaning of that Act);

(b) approved for the purposes of section 20 or 39 of the Mental Health (Scotland) Act 1984 by a Health Board as having special experience in the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorder (within the meaning of that Act); or

(c) appointed for the purposes of Part II of the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 by the Mental Health Commission for Northern Ireland;

"prescribed" means prescribed by regulations made by the Secretary of State.

(2) For the purposes of the provisions of sections 115A, 116, 116C and 116D of this Act which permit a court to act on the written evidence of a registered medical practitioner or a registered medical practitioner who is duly approved, a report in writing purporting to be signed by a registered medical practitioner or a registered medical practitioner who is duly approved may, subject to subsection (3) below, be received in evidence without proof of the signature of the practitioner and without proof that he has the requisite qualifications or is duly approved; but the court may require the signatory of any such report to be called to give oral evidence.

(3) Where, in pursuance of a direction of the court, any such report is tendered in evidence otherwise than by or on behalf of the accused, then—

(a) if the accused is represented by counsel or a solicitor, a copy of the report shall be given to his counsel or solicitor;

(b) if the accused is not so represented, the substance of the report shall be disclosed to him; and

(c) the accused may require the signatory of the report to be called to give oral evidence, and evidence to rebut the evidence contained in the report may be called by the accused or on his behalf.

(4) The power of the Secretary of State to make regulations under sections 116A, 116B, 116C and 116D above, and orders under section 116D(2) above, shall be exercisable by statutory instrument which shall be subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament.'

No. 25, in page 31, line 9, at end insert—

'. In section 225(1) of the Army Act 1955 (general provisions as to interpretation)—

(a) after the definition of "active service" there shall be inserted the following definition—

"admission order" has the meaning assigned to it by section 116B(1) of this Act;";

(b) after the definition of "Governor" there shall be inserted the following definition—

"guardianship order" has the meaning assigned to it by section 116C(1) of this Act;"; and

(c) after the definition of "stoppages" there shall be inserted the following definition—

"supervision and treatment order" has the meaning assigned to it by section 116D(1) of this Act;".

. In section 223(1) of the Air Force Act 1955 (general provisions as to interpretation)—

(a) after the definition of "active service" there shall be inserted the following definition—

"admission order" has the meaning assigned to it by section 116B(1) of this Act;";

(b) after the definition of "Governor" there shall be inserted the following definition—

"guardianship order" has the meaning assigned to it by section 116C(1) of this Act;"; and

(c) after the definition of "stoppages" there shall be inserted the following definition—

"supervision and treatment order" has the meaning assigned to it by section 116D(1) of this Act;".'.

No. 26, in page 32, leave out lines 35 to 46 and insert—

'(2) Subject to subsections (3) and (4) below, the court shall make one of the following orders in respect of the accused, namely—

(a) an admission order;

(b) a guardianship order;

(c) a supervision and treatment order; or

(d) an order discharging him absolutely,

as the court thinks most suitable in all the circumstances of the case.

(3) The court may not make an order under subsection (2)(b), (c) or (d) above if the offence to which the finding relates is an offence the sentence for which is fixed by law.

(4) The court shall not make a guardianship order or a supervision and treatment order unless it has power to do so by virtue of section 63C or section 63D below.

(5) An order under subsection (2)(a), (b) or (c) above shall be treated as if it had been made by a civil court in England and Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland, as the court may direct, and the appropriate mental health legislation shall apply accordingly with such modifications as may be prescribed.'.

No. 27, in page 32, line 47, leave out 'section' and insert 'Act'.

No. 28, in page 32, line 50, at end insert—

'(1A) Where an admission order is made by a court-martial, the court may, in such circumstances as may be prescribed, direct the accused to be treated as if an order restricting his discharge had been made under the appropriate mental health legislation, either without limit of time or (if a civil court would have been permitted to do so under the legislation concerned) during such period as may be specified in the direction.'.

No. 29, in page 33, line 10, leave out from first 'the' to end of line 14 and insert

'appropriate mental health legislation to apply, with such modifications as may be prescribed, in relation to admission orders as the legislation concerned applies in relation to hospital orders;'.

No. 30, in page 33, line 17, at end insert—

'(4) In this section "hospital", "hospital order" and "place of safety" have the same meanings as in the appropriate mental health legislation.'.

No. 31, in page 33, line 18, leave out from beginning to end of line 11 on page 34 and insert—

'Guardianship orders

63C.—(1) In this Act "guardianship order" means an order placing the accused under the guardianship of—

(a) in a case where the order is treated as if it had been made by a civil court in England and Wales, a local social services authority or such other person approved by a local social services authority as may be specified in the order;

(b) in a case where the order is treated as if it had been made by a civil court in Scotland, a local authority or such other person approved by a local authority as may be specified in the order;

(c) in a case where the order is treated as if it had been made by a civil court in Northern Ireland, a Board or an authorised HSS trust or such other person approved by a Board or an authorised HSS trust as may be specified in the order.

(2) In subsection (1) above—

"authorised HSS trust" and "Board" have the same meanings as in the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986;

"local authority" has the same meaning as in the Mental Health (Scotland) Act 1984; and

"local social services authority" has the same meaning as in the Mental Health Act 1983.

(3) A court-martial shall not make a guardianship order unless—

(a) the court is satisfied, on the written or oral evidence of two registered medical practitioners, that—

(i) the accused is suffering from mental illness, psychopathic disorder, severe mental impairment or mental impairment; and

(ii) the mental disorder is of a nature or degree which warrants his reception into guardianship; and

(b) the court is of the opinion, having regard to all the circumstances including the nature of the offence and the character and antecedents of the accused and the other available methods of dealing with him, that the most suitable method of disposing of the case is by means of a guardianship order.

(4) A court-martial shall not make a guardianship order unless it is also satisfied that the authority or other person intended to be specified in the order is willing to receive the accused into guardianship.

(5) A guardianship order shall specify the form or forms of mental disorder referred to in subsection (3)(a) above from which, upon the evidence taken into account under that subsection, the accused is found by the court to be suffering; and a guardianship order shall not be made unless the accused is described by each of the practitioners whose evidence is taken into account under that subsection as suffering from the same one of those forms of mental disorder, whether or not he is also described by either of them as suffering from another of those forms of mental disorder.

(6) The appropriate mental health legislation shall apply, with such modifications as may be prescribed, in relation to guardianship orders under this section as it applies to guardianship orders under the legislation concerned.

(7) In this section "mental disorder", "mental impairment", "psychopathic disorder" and "severe mental impairment" have the same meanings as in the Mental Health Act 1983.'.

No. 32, in page 34, line 12, leave out 'section' and insert 'Act'.

No. 33, in page 35, line 12, leave out from beginning to end of line 17 on page 36 and insert—

'Provisions supplementary to section 62A to 63D

63E.—(1) In this section and sections 62A to 63D above—

"the appropriate mental health legislation" means—

(a) in a case where an order is treated as if it had been made by a civil court in England and Wales, the Mental Health Act 1983;

(b) in a case where an order is treated as if it had been made by a civil court in Scotland, the Mental Health (Scotland) Act 1984 and Part VI of the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995;

(c) in a case where an order is treated as if it had been made by a civil court in Northern Ireland, the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986;

"duly approved" means—

(a) approved for the purposes of section 12 of the Mental Health Act 1983 by the Secretary of State as having special experience in the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorder (within the meaning of that Act);

(b) approved for the purposes of section 20 or 39 of the Mental Health (Scotland) Act 1984 by a Health Board as having special experience in the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorder (within the meaning of that Act); or

(c) appointed for the purposes of Part II of the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 by the Mental Health Commission for Northern Ireland;

"prescribed" means prescribed by regulations made by the Secretary of State.

(2) For the purposes of the provisions of sections 62A, 63, 63C and 63D of this Act which permit a court to act on the written evidence of a registered medical practitioner or a registered medical practitioner who is duly approved, a report in writing purporting to be signed by a registered medical practitioner or a registered medical practitioner who is duly approved may, subject to subsection (3) below, be received in evidence without proof of the signature of the practitioner and without proof that he has the requisite qualifications or is duly approved; but the court may require the signatory of any such report to be called to give oral evidence.

(3) Where, in pursuance of a direction of the court, any such report is tendered in evidence otherwise than by or on behalf of the accused, then—

(a) if the accused is represented by counsel or a solicitor, a copy of the report shall be given to his counsel or solicitor;

(b) if the accused is not so represented, the substance of the report shall be disclosed to him; and

(c) the accused may require the signatory of the report to be called to give oral evidence, and evidence to rebut the evidence contained in the report may be called by the accused or on his behalf.

(4) The power of the Secretary of State to make regulations under sections 63A, 63B, 63C and 63D above, and orders under section 63D(2) above, shall be exercisable by statutory instrument which shall be subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament.'

No. 34, in page 36, line 17, at end insert—

'. In section 135(1) of the 1957 Act (general provisions as to interpretation)—

(a) before the definition of "aircraft" there shall be inserted the following definition—

"admission order" has the meaning assigned to it by section 63B(1) of this Act;";

(b) after the definition of "Governor" there shall be inserted the following definition—

"guardianship order" has the meaning assigned to it by section 63C(1) of this Act;"; and

(c) after the definition of "steals" there shall be inserted the following definition—

"supervision and treatment order" has the meaning assigned to it by section 63D(1) of this Act;".'.

No. 35, in page 36, line 33, leave out from 'shall' to end of line 14 on page 37 and insert

'make one of the following orders in respect of the appellant, namely—

(a) an admission order;

(b) a guardianship order;

(c) a supervision and treatment order; or

(d) an order discharging him absolutely,

as they think most suitable in all the circumstances of the case.

(3) The Appeal Court may not make an order under subsection (2)(b), (c) or (d) above if the offence to which the appeal relates is an offence the sentence for which is fixed by law.

(4) An order under subsection (2)(a), (b) or (c) above shall be treated as if it had been made by a civil court in England and Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland, as the Appeal Court may direct, and the appropriate mental health legislation shall apply accordingly with such modifications as may be prescribed by regulations made by the Secretary of State.

(5) The provisions of, or made under, the relevant Service Act in relation to admission orders, guardianship orders and supervision and treatment orders shall apply to the Appeal Court as if—

(a) references to a court-martial were references to the Appeal Court;

(b) references to the accused were references to the appellant,

and with such other modifications as may be prescribed by regulations made by the Secretary of State.

(6) The power of the Secretary of State under subsections (4) and (5) above to make regulations shall be exercisable by statutory instrument, which shall be subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament."

No. 36, in page 37, line 17, at end insert—

'. In section 22(4) of the 1968 Act (consequences where appeal under section 21 allowed), at the beginning there shall be inserted the words "Subject to section 23 below,".'.

No. 37, in page 37, line 30, leave out from 'shall' to end of line 14 on page 38 and insert

'make one of the following orders in respect of the appellant, namely—

(a) an admission order;

(b) a guardianship order;

(c) a supervision and treatment order; or

(d) an order discharging him absolutely,

as they think most suitable in all the circumstances of the case.

(3) The Appeal Court may not make an order under subsection (2)(b), (c) or (d) above if the offence to which the appeal relates is an offence the sentence for which is fixed by law.

(4) An order under subsection (2)(a), (b) or (c) above shall be treated as if it had been made by a civil court in England and Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland, as the Appeal Court may direct, and the appropriate mental health legislation shall apply accordingly with such modifications as may be prescribed by regulations made by the Secretary of State.

(5) The provisions of, or made under, the relevant Service Act in relation to admission orders, guardianship orders and supervision and treatment orders shall apply to the Appeal Court as if—

(a) references to a court-martial were references to the Appeal Court;

(b) references to the accused were references to the appellant,

and with such other modifications as may be prescribed by regulations made by the Secretary of State.

(6) The power of the Secretary of State under subsections (4) and (5) above to make regulations shall be exercisable by statutory instrument which shall be subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament.'.

No. 38, in page 38, line 28, leave out from 'detained' to end of line 45 and insert

'pursuant to an admission order made by a court-martial, make an order for his continued detention;

(b) in any other case, make an order that the appellant be admitted for assessment, in accordance with regulations made by the Secretary of State, to such hospital as may be specified by the Secretary of State.

(3) An order under subsection (2) above shall be treated as if it had been made by a civil court in England and Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland, as the Appeal Court may direct, and the appropriate mental health legislation shall apply accordingly with such modifications as may be prescribed by regulations made by the Secretary of State.

(4) The power of the Secretary of State under subsections (2)(b) and (3) above to make regulations shall be exercisable by statutory instrument, which shall be subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament.

(5) In this section "hospital" and "mental disorder" have the same meanings as in the appropriate mental health legislation.".'.

No. 39, in page 39, leave out lines 14 to 20.

No. 40, in page 39, line 28, leave out from '(1)' to end of line 41 and insert—

'(a) before the definition of "the Air Force Act" there shall be inserted the following definition—

"admission order" has the same meaning as in the relevant Service Act;";

(b) after the definition of "appellant" there shall be inserted the following definition—

"the appropriate mental health legislation" means—

(a) in a case where an order is treated as if it had been made by a civil court in England and Wales, the Mental Health Act 1983;

(b) in a case where an order is treated as if it had been made by a civil court in Scotland, the Mental Health (Scotland) Act 1984 and Part VI of the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995;

(c) in a case where an order is treated as if it had been made by a civil court in Northern Ireland, the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986;";

(c) after the definition of "army court-martial" there shall be inserted the following definition—

"civil court" has the same meaning as in the relevant Service Act;";

(d) after the definition of "court-martial;" there shall be inserted the following definition—

"duly approved" means—

(a) approved for the purposes of section 12 of the Mental Health Act 1983 by the Secretary of State as having special experience in the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorder (within the meaning of that Act);

(b) approved for the purposes of section 20 or 39 of the Mental Health (Scotland) Act 1984 by a Health Board as having special experience in the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorder (within the meaning of that Act); or

(c) appointed for the purposes of Part II of the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 by the Mental Health Commission for Northern Ireland; ";

(e) after the definition of "enactment" there shall be inserted the following definition—

"guardianship order" has the same meaning as in the relevant Service Act;";

(f) at the end there shall be inserted the following definition—

"supervision and treatment order" has the same meaning as in the relevant Service Act." '.

No. 41, in page 39, line 43, leave out from beginning to end of line 5 on page 41 and insert—

' "(2A) For the purposes of the provisions of sections 16, 23 and 23A of this Act which permit the Appeal Court to act on the written evidence of a registered medical practitioner or a registered medical practitioner who is duly approved, a report in writing purporting to be signed by a registered medical practitioner or a registered medical practitioner who is duly approved may, subject to subsection (2B) below, be received in evidence without proof of the signature of the practitioner and without proof that he has the requisite qualifications or is duly approved; but the Appeal Court may require the signatory of any such report to be called to give oral evidence.

(2B) Where, in pursuance of a direction of the Appeal Court, any such report is tendered in evidence otherwise than by or on behalf of the appellant, then—

(a) if the appellant is represented by counsel or a solicitor, a copy of the report shall be given to his counsel or solicitor;

(b) if the appellant is not so represented, the substance of the report shall be disclosed to him; and

(c) the appellant may require the signatory of the report to be called to give oral evidence, and evidence to rebut the evidence contained in the report may be called by the appellant or on his behalf." '.—*[Mr. Soames.]*

Schedule 1, as amended, agreed to.

Clause 8 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 2 agreed to.

Clause 9

FINGERPRINTING OF CERTAIN OFFENDERS

Amendments made: No. 1, in page 4, line 37, leave out '50' and insert '52G'.

No. 2, in page 4, line 39, leave out '49' and insert '52D'.—*[Mr. Soames.]*

Clause 9, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New clause 3

TAKING OF SAMPLES FROM CERTAIN OFFENDERS

'.—(1) A service policeman may, for the purpose of recording information, take a sample to which this section applies from a person without his consent if that person has been convicted of an offence in service disciplinary proceedings.

(2) This section applies to a sample of hair (other than pubic hair) or to a swab taken from a person's mouth.

(3) The power under subsection (1) above may be exercised in relation to a person convicted of an offence only if—

(a) he has not had a sample to which this section applies taken from him since his conviction; or

(b) where he has had such a sample taken from him, the sample has proved insufficient.

(4) The power under subsection (1) above may not be exercised after the end of the period of three months beginning—

(a) in a case falling within subsection (3)(a) above, with the date of the conviction;

(b) in a case falling within subsection (3)(b) above, with the date on which a service policeman is informed of the fact that the sample has proved insufficient.

(5) A service policeman may use reasonable force, if necessary, in exercising the power under subsection (1) above.

(6) A sample of hair may be taken either by cutting hairs or by plucking hairs with their roots so long as no more are plucked than are reasonably considered to be necessary for a sufficient sample.

(7) In this section—

"service disciplinary proceedings" and "service policeman" have the same meanings as in section 9 above; and

"sufficient" and "insufficient", in relation to a sample, means sufficient or insufficient (in point of quantity or quality) for the purpose of enabling information to be produced by the means of analysis used or to be used in relation to the sample.

(8) This section is without prejudice to any power to take samples under any other enactment or under any rule of law.'.—*[Mr. Soames.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. Soames: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

The Chairman: With this, it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 80, in title, line 5, leave out 'fingerprinting of' and insert

'taking of fingerprints and samples from'.

Dr. Godman: I want to voice some concerns that I have about the new clause and to seek guidance from the Minister. The new clause begins by stating:

"A service policeman may, for the purpose of recording information, take a sample".

In the Bill, a service policeman is defined as

"a member of the Royal Navy Regulating Branch, the Royal Marines Police, the Royal Military Police, the Royal Air Force Police or the staff of the Royal Air Force Provost Marshal."

I can only speak with some experience, albeit limited, of the Royal Military police. Presumably, under the new clause, a service policeman could be a lance-corporal. Is that the case? Why is the clause so much out of kilter with extant legislation in Scotland and in England and Wales?

In part II of the Prisoners and Criminal Proceedings (Scotland) Act 1993, clause 28 allows for a police constable, presumably the equivalent of a lance-corporal in the corps of the Royal Military police, to take a sample. But subsection (4) states:

"A constable may, with the authority of an officer of a rank no lower than inspector, take from the person—

(a) from the hair of an external part of the body".

From that point clause 28 of the 1993 Act and new clause 3 are almost identical. Why does the new clause not have that limiting subsection? Why has the Minister chosen to allow any member of a military police establishment to take such action against a prisoner? Surely if it is good enough for the civil police in Scotland to require an inspector to give permission, the same should hold for the armed forces.

In a crude, rough way, the rank of inspector is equivalent to an Army major. Therefore, why not insert a subsection into new clause 3 which allows only a lance corporal in the military police, say, to take such a body sample once he or she has the approval of the officer commanding the unit, or someone of equal rank?

In terms of human rights, the new clause leaves a lot to be desired when compared with the Prisoners and Criminal Proceedings (Scotland) Act. At the most appropriate moment, the new clause should be changed in the way that I have suggested.

Mr. Soames: The hon. Member for Greenock and Port Glasgow (Dr. Godman) says that the new clause is out of kilter, but I have to tell him that it is one of the most kiltered new clauses that I have ever met. I want to reassure him that the rank of the service policeman concerned is completely immaterial. All service policemen, given the authority and status of their position and the special responsibilities that they carry, will be able to undertake these tasks. There is no problem with regard to the law being the same in Scotland, but I shall investigate further the matter that he has raised and write to him in greater detail.

5.45 pm

Mr. Menzies Campbell: It is not surprising that the Minister does not have encyclopaedic knowledge of Scottish general law, but the hon. Member for Greenock and Port Glasgow (Dr. Godman) has raised an interesting question of principle—namely the level at which a power of this kind should be able to be exercised. If, as I understand it, it is a principle to try and approximate as far as possible the law which pertains to the armed services with the law which pertains in civilian life, there is clearly a substantial issue of principle as to whether the person who is lowest in the command structure in the military police can exercise a power which, in the civilian sector, can be exercised only by someone of a substantially higher rank. I therefore hope that the Minister will give serious consideration to the important point of principle which the hon. Member for Greenock and Port Glasgow has isolated.

Mr. Soames: I assure the hon. and learned Member for Fife, North–East (Mr. Campbell) that I do not hold the kind of views about my learned Friend that the hon. Gentleman does. That is a supremely helpful and constructive intervention. I have no idea what the answer to the point is. I shall investigate it and write to the hon. and learned Member for Fife, North-East and the hon. Member for Greenock and Port Glasgow. I am sure that they have a valid point, and we will clarify it.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

Clause 10 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 3 agreed to.

Clauses 11 and 12 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 13

REVIEW OF FINDINGS AND SENTENCES OF COURTS-MARTIAL

Amendment made: No. 3, in page 6, line 30, leave out 'court–martial'.—*[Mr. Soames.]*

Clause 13, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 4

AMENDMENTS RELATING TO THE REVIEW OF FINDINGS AND SENTENCE

Amendments made: No. 42, in page 43, line 28, at end insert—

'. Section 108 (power of accused to present petition against finding or sentence at any time after finding or sentence) shall cease to have effect.

. For section 112 (approval required for death sentences) there shall be substituted the following section—

"Review of proceedings of courts–martial

Approval required for death sentences

112.—(1) A sentence of death passed by a court–martial shall not be carried out until it has been reviewed under section 113 of this Act and has not been quashed or replaced by another sentence on the review.

(2) A sentence of death passed by a court-martial shall not be carried out in a colony unless it is also approved by the Governor of the colony." '.

No. 43, in page 44, line 41, at end insert—

'(aa) revoke an order made by the court under section 120A(1) of this Act;'.

No. 44, in page 45, line 9, leave out from 'section' to 'for' and insert

'113A (power of reviewing authority to authorise retrial)—

(a) in subsection (1),'

No. 45, in page 45, line 11, at end insert '; and

(b) in subsection (2), for the words "Defence Council" there shall be substituted the words "reviewing authority".'

No. 46, in page 45, line 11, at end insert—

'. For section 115 of the Army Act 1955 (review of summary findings and awards) there shall be substituted the following section—

"Review of summary findings and awards

115.—(1) This section applies where a charge has been dealt with summarily and a finding has been recorded that the charge has been proved.

(2) The accused may at any time request a review of the finding or any punishment awarded (or both); and where he does so, the finding or punishment (or both) shall be reviewed.

(3) The finding or any punishment awarded (or both) may be reviewed at any other time.

(4) A review under this section shall be carried out in accordance with the provisions of Queen's Regulations.

(5) A review under this section may be carried out by—

(a) the Defence Council;

(b) any military, naval or air-force officer superior in command to the officer who dealt summarily with the charge;

(c) a general officer or brigadier appointed by the Defence Council to carry out the review or any class of review which includes the review.

(6) Section 113AA of this Act shall apply to a review under this section by an authority mentioned in subsection (5) above as it applies to a review under section 113 of this Act by the reviewing authority.

(7) In the application of section 113AA to reviews under this section, that section shall have effect as if—

(a) references to the court-martial were references to the officer who dealt summarily with the charge;

(b) references to a finding of guilt were references to a finding that the charge has been proved;

(c) references to a sentence passed were references to a punishment awarded; and

(d) subsections (5)(aa) and (6) were omitted."

. For section 115 of the Air Force Act 1955 (review of summary findings and awards) there shall be substituted the following section—

"Review of summary findings and awards

115.—(1) This section applies where a charge has been dealt with summarily and a finding has been recorded that the charge has been proved.

(2) The accused may at any time request a review of the finding or any punishment awarded (or both); and where he does so, the finding or punishment (or both) shall be reviewed.

(3) The finding or any punishment awarded (or both) may be reviewed at any other time.

(4) A review under this section shall be carried out in accordance with the provisions of Queen's Regulations.

(5) A review under this section may be carried out by—

(a) the Defence Council;

(b) any air-force, naval or military officer superior in command to the officer who dealt summarily with the charge;

(c) an air officer appointed by the Defence Council to carry out the review or any class of review which includes the review.

(6) Section 113AA of this Act shall apply to a review under this section by an authority mentioned in subsection (5) above as it applies to a review under section 113 of this Act by the reviewing authority.

(7) In the application of section 113AA to reviews under this section, that section shall have effect as if—

(a) references to the court-martial were references to the officer who dealt summarily with the charge;

(b) references to a finding of guilt were references to a finding that the charge has been proved;

(c) references to a sentence passed were references to a punishment awarded; and

(d) subsections (5)(aa) and (6) were omitted."'.

No. 47, in page 45, leave out lines 12 and 13.

No. 48, in page 45, leave out lines 22 to 24.

No. 49, in page 45, line 28, leave out 'under subsection (3) above'.

No. 50, in page 45, line 36, leave out 'under subsection (3) above'.

No. 51, in page 46, line 3, leave out 'General Orders' and insert 'rules'.

No. 52, in page 46, line 34, at end insert—

'(aa) revoke an order made by the court under section 89A(1) of this Act;'.

No. 53, in page 47, leave out lines 3 to 9.

No. 54, in page 47, line 10, leave out '(1)'.

No. 55, in page 47, line 11, after 'Council"' insert

'in both places where they appear'.

No. 56, in page 47, line 11, at end insert—

'. After section 71A there shall be inserted the following section—

'Review of summary findings and awards

71B.—(1) This section applies where on a summary trial the accused has been found guilty of any offence.

(2) The accused may at any time request a review of the finding or any sentence awarded (or both); and where he does so, the finding or sentence (or both) shall be reviewed.

(3) The finding or any sentence awarded (or both) may be reviewed at any other time.

(4) A review under this section shall be carried out in accordance with the provisions of Queen's Regulations.

(5) A review under this section may be carried out by—

(a) the Defence Council;

(b) any naval officer superior in command to the officer who tried the charge summarily;

(c) a flag officer appointed by the Defence Council to carry out the review or any class of review which includes the review.

(6) Section 71 of this Act shall apply to a review under this section by an authority mentioned in subsection (5) above as it applies to a review under section 70 of this Act by the reviewing authority.

(7) In the application of section 71 to reviews under this section, that section shall have effect as if—

(a) references to the court-martial were references to the officer before whom the summary trial took place; and

(b) subsections (5)(aa) and (6) were omitted."'.—*[Mr. Soames.]*

Schedule 4, as amended, agreed to.

Clauses 14 to 16 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 17

"REDRESS OF COMPLAINTS

Amendments made: No. 4, in page 9, line 10, after 'Act' insert

', ask for a review under section 115 of this Act'.

No. 5, in page 10, line 15, after 'Act' insert

', ask for a review under section 115 of this Act'.

No. 6, in page 11, line 21, after 'Act' insert

', ask for a review under section 70A of this Act'.—*[Mr. Soames.]*

Clause 17, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 18 to 20 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 21

EQUAL TREATMENT: GREAT BRITAIN

Amendment made: No. 7, in page 17, line 13, leave out from 'the' to second 'the' in line 15 and insert

'period of service during which the claim arose ended more than nine months before'.—*[Mr. Soames.]*

Clause 21, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 22

"SERVICE PAY AND CONDITIONS

Amendment made: No. 8, in page 18, line 45, leave out from 'the' to second 'the' in line 47 and insert

'period of service during which the claim arose ended more than nine months before'.—*[Mr. Soames.]*

Clause 22, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 23

OTHER COMPLAINTS: GREAT BRITAIN

Amendments made: No. 9, in page 19, line 23, leave out from 'Section' to '(application' in line 25 and insert

'192 of the Employment Rights Act 1996'.

No. 10, in page 19, line 27, leave out '(3)' and insert '(4)'.

No. 11, in page 19, line 35, leave out '(4)' and insert '(5)'.

No. 12, in page 19, line 37, leave out '(4)' and insert '(5)'.

No. 13, in page 19, line 38, leave out '(2)' and insert '(3)'.

No. 14, in page 19, line 38, leave out '(3)' and insert '(4)'.

No. 15, in page 19, line 43, leave out '(3)' and insert '(4)'.

No. 16, in page 20, line 1, leave out '(7)' and insert '(6)'.—*[Mr. Soames.]*

Clause 23, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 24 to 26 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 27

GREENWICH HOSPITAL

Mr. Nick Raynsford (Greenwich): I beg to move amendment No. 83, in page 22, line 43, at beginning insert

'Where he is satisfied that the objectives set out in paragraphs (a) to (c) of subsection (2) of this section are met,'.

The Chairman: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Government new clause 4—*Grants for preservation of Royal Naval College site.*

Mr. Raynsford: Clause 27 governs the use of the site currently occupied by the royal naval college in Greenwich. As hon. Members know, the subject has been raised in the House on several occasions during the past year or so.

Last summer, the Government decided to put this magnificent complex of buildings on the market following their decision to close the college. The subsequent appearance of some of the country's finest architectural masterpieces in the pages of an estate agent's catalogue rightly provoked a national outcry. It says a great deal for the curious values of the present Government that they could ever have felt it appropriate to flog off such an important part of our national heritage in that way. Fortunately, common sense has finally prevailed: even the Secretary of State for Defence now seems to recognise that this was a privatisation too far. For that reason, we are now considering a clause that has undergone a substantial transformation since it was first debated on Second Reading in December.

That transformation owes a great deal to two main influences. First, there was the weight of public opinion in Greenwich and throughout the country—public opinion that was outraged at the Government's treatment of some of our country's finest buildings, and the risk of their falling into unsuitable hands. Secondly, there was the timely intervention of members of the Select Committee, who visited Greenwich not just once but twice to look around the college complex and take evidence on site. As the Committee's report makes clear, they were convinced that the Bill as originally drafted failed to provide adequate guarantees as to the future occupancy or uses of the site.

The Bill has now been amended. Clause 27(2) requires the Secretary of State to have regard to three main concerns. First, he must have regard to

"the importance of preserving for the benefit of the nation the historic buildings and monuments"

on the site, and of maintaining its "architectural integrity". Secondly, he must have regard to

"the desirability of securing reasonable public access".

Thirdly, he must have regard to

"the desirability of preventing any use"

that is "out of keeping" with the "unique character and history" of the site.

So far so good. Those are important safeguards that were not previously in the Bill, and they represent a major step forward as well as a triumph for common sense. Clause 27(3), however, remains unaltered. It allows the Secretary of State to grant a lease on any or all the Greenwich buildings for a period of up to 150 years to

any person whom he considers suitable. There is no link between the provisions in subsection (3)—which, in effect, prompted the public outcry—and the new subsection that introduces the safeguards to which I referred.

The purpose of my amendment is simple—to establish a clear link between the Secretary of State's obligation to have regard to those wider national and heritage issues and interests, and his power to grant a lease. The amendment makes it a precondition of the grant of any lease for the Secretary of State to be satisfied that the objectives set out in subsection (2) have been met. It means that, before granting a lease, he will have to be convinced that the outcome will be the preservation of the historic buildings and architectural integrity of the site, the maintenance of reasonable public access and the prevention of any inappropriate use.

I hope that the Government will accept the amendment. It is clearly in keeping with their own current intentions, now that they have backed away from their ill-conceived attempt to dispose of the buildings on the open market. Subsection (2) is a clear reflection of their admission that the previous approach was wrong, and that there must now be explicit safeguards in the Bill to protect this incomparable site.

While we hear the assurances that the Government have been giving, Ministers cannot be surprised if we remain a little sceptical, given their previous record. We welcome the inclusion of subsection (2), but many hon. Members will want to be absolutely sure that the criteria spelled out in that subsection are effective. That is the purpose of the amendment. Without it, there can be no absolute guarantee that,having had regard to those criteria, the current Secretary of State—or, indeed, any future Secretary of State—will not subsequently offer the buildings on a 150-year lease to an organisation that does not entirely satisfy the objectives set out in subsection (2).

I am not saying that that is what the Government currently intend to do. I understand that negotiations are proceeding with the university of Greenwich and the national maritime museum, both of which are widely recognised as appropriate and suitable users of the site. I hope that those negotiations bear fruit. Having said that, I must add that we are considering legislation that could remain on the statute book for 100 year or more. The legislation that the Bill replaces dates back to 1869, and what we are considering this afternoon could well remain in force for a similar or longer period.

We cannot anticipate the circumstances that may arise at a future date, when the national maritime museum or, indeed, the university of Greenwich may have moved to pastures new. In such circumstances, without the link that my amendment seeks to introduce, it would still be open to a future Secretary of State to grant a lease to another organisation that did not entirely satisfy the criteria in subsection (2).

In that event, the Secretary of State could plead that, having had regard to the criteria, he had nevertheless concluded that the lease that he proposed to grant was the best that he could envisage in the circumstances, even if it did not satisfy those criteria. Future generations will not thank us if we leave any opportunity open for such an outcome, which could involve these magnificent buildings passing into hands that are not appropriate or suitable.

The experience of the past few months should surely have taught the Government a salutary lesson—that we cannot and must not allow the possibility of some of our country's most magnificent buildings ever again to be offered for sale in an estate agent's catalogue.

Considerable progress has been made since the firm of Knight, Frank and Rutley advertised the Royal Naval college in its glossy brochure last autumn. Not only have the Government been chastened by the experience, but the estate agents have not emerged unscathed. Mr. Rutley appears to have been a casualty of the engagement. Our responsibility is to make sure that the legislation is watertight and that the safeguards will bite to prevent any possible repeat of that demeaning and deplorable episode. My amendment provides the necessary safeguard, and I trust that the Committee will accept it.

6 pm

Mr. Key: The Select Committee on Defence looked at this matter in great detail, and when we visited Greenwich we were convinced that we should press the Ministry of Defence. I understand the hon. Gentleman's cause and I appreciate the way that he has put it, but I am convinced that his amendment is unnecessary. The Government amendments went considerably further than I and other members of the Select Committee had hoped for in our wildest dreams. It was good to see the Government responding so swiftly.

The hon. Member for Greenwich (Mr. Raynsford) went rather over the top, because the college was never offered for sale: it was a lease that was on offer. That matters, and I do not want the hon. Gentleman to get away with promoting the idea that the Government ever sought to sell the freehold of those buildings. I had some responsibility for our heritage while I was in the Department of National Heritage, and from my experience I can say that the solution is good. I am confident and the people of Greenwich can be confident about that.

I pay tribute to the Minister and to the Secretary of State for Defence who took a great personal interest in this matter. Of course lessons have been learnt: the Minister said that in Committee. I hope that we can put this episode behind us and move forward to ensure that a proper and fitting use is found for those wonderful world heritage site buildings.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip–Northwood): I support the amendment. The hon. Member for Greenwich (Mr. Raynsford) has campaigned to preserve the royal naval college and related buildings for the nation, and deserves to be widely applauded in Parliament, in London and throughout the country. The royal naval college is an incomparable part of our nation's maritime history and naval traditions, and I am pleased at the drafting of clause 27. However, the strict stipulations that the amendment seeks to introduce are necessary and wise. Clause 27(3) states:

> "It shall be lawful for the Secretary of State to grant a lease of any of the land to which this section applies, with its appurtenances, to any person appearing to him to be suitable for a term not exceeding 150 years."

Potentially, that is a long term and "appearing . . . to be suitable" is not the kind of strictly defined criterion that should be demanded for the preservation of the nation's maritime history or of buildings of this kind.

[Mr. John Wilkinson]

I welcome the interesting new clause, in that it makes possible the granting of moneys from Parliament for the repair and maintenance of the land and buildings on the royal naval college site. I hope that that will make it possible for an appropriate educational function to be fulfilled. My desire has always been for a tri-service cadet college at Greenwich in that fine historic setting. There is an educational tradition at the college, first, as a staff college for the Royal Navy and then as a successor to the former joint services staff college at Latimer.

Many of us had hoped that it would be the new tri-service staff college but that opportunity was not taken. I earnestly request the Ministry of Defence to look at the possibility of establishing such an officer cadet college, perhaps in combination with the university of Greenwich, so that the Bill's ethos of ensuring that our armed forces maintain the best standards of discipline and respect for the traditions of the services can be maintained. We should also seek to provide education in the newest technologies, sciences and engineering that are required for a career in the profession of arms in all three services. That should be provided within a fine, historic, maritime setting as befits an island nation with so many naval traditions.

The late Sir Winston Churchill said that we make buildings but that they make us. To inculcate those qualities in officer cadets who will form the backbone of their respective services and who will go from Greenwich to professional training at Cranwell, Sandhurst or Dartmouth is laudaole, and it is made possible by the new clause. Nevertheless, I urge the Minister, with his characteristic magnanimity and generosity, to accept the entirely sensible amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Greenwich who has campaigned so long and hard and so effectively for the preservation of the royal naval college, Greenwich.

Dr. Reid: I should like to raise two matters. First, the Government have nearly got it right, and they have done so by that most unusual of expedients in the Ministry of Defence—consulting and listening to people. That process has extended to the Armed Forces Bill and threatens to overcome the Ministry of Defence, a Department that I have never seen as being in the vanguard of open government. The Minister has taken to it with the zeal of a convert, and long may it continue.

Secondly, the achievement of the safeguards that are required to preserve the Royal Naval college for the nation is much to the credit of all parties, many hon. Members, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich (Mr. Raynsford). It would be the icing on the cake if, as hon. Members have said, the Minister accepted the amendment or gave assurances that substantially give effect to its spirit, because that would save a Division.

The criteria to which the Secretary of State must have regard under clause 27(2) are architectural integrity, public access and the history and heritage of the building. They must be the necessary prerequisites when he is considering the use of the powers that are vested in him under subsection (3), which contains the power to sell or lease the land for an extended period. If he agreed to do that expeditiously it would save much time, we would not need to divide on the amendment, and we would have one of those rare occasions on which hon. Members could go away happy and ready to praise not just a Minister, but a Minister in the Ministry of Defence.

Mr. Soames: The speech by the hon. Member for Motherwell, North (Dr. Reid) was almost seductive and I had to think hard to resist his blandishments.

I shall try to deal with the issues that have been raised. As the Committee knows, the clause will allow the Secretary of State to grant a lease to a non-Government body in respect of the royal naval college, Greenwich. Section 7 of the Greenwich Hospital Act 1869 restricts the use of college buildings to occupation by the Royal Navy, Government Departments, or organisations that are associated with seafaring.

The clause was extensively amended by the Select Committee, to whose members I pay tribute for their admirable work, and by Government amendments that were tabled there. The principal amendment was intended to ensure that there should be appropriate acknowledgement in the Bill of the interests and considerations to which the Secretary of State in his capacity as trustee of Greenwich hospital should have regard in reaching a decision on a lease in respect of the royal naval college. Those include maintaining the absolute architectural integrity of the site, preserving it for the nation's benefit, the desirability of public access and ensuring suitable use of the site. For those reasons, much of what the hon. Member for Greenwich (Mr. Raynsford) said was ungracious and unfair.

Other important amendments added more detailed provision in relation to sub-leases because of the proposal to grant the head lease of the royal naval college to a trust, which would, in its turn, grant sub-leases or licences to others. Thus, it is made clear that only the Secretary of State can authorise the granting of the sub-lease or assignment of the lease on terms that he has agreed.

It is important to remember that the Secretary of State is holding the land for the benefit of a charity: Greenwich hospital. It would be unfair to that charity if he could determine future occupation without having regard to the charity's interests. As amended by the Select Committee, the clause seeks to achieve a proper balance between the charity's private interests, which the Secretary of State, as trustee, must seek to safeguard, and the wider public interest.

I turn to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson). His idea of a tri-service college is interesting. As he knows, Greenwich simply does not have the capacity to accommodate the tri-service college as it forms up, but I was interested in his proposal and I would be grateful if he would send me more details of his scheme, although we would not be able to do it at Greenwich.

Sir Michael Grylls (North–West Surrey): As my hon. Friend has raised the question of the tri-service college in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson), will he think again about the proposal temporarily to coelocate the staff college to Bracknell? The information that I have is that the staff college in Camberley in my constituency is concerned about that and that Bracknell will be an unattractive temporary solution. I realise that something must be done while the main new tri-service college is

built, but there is a feeling that Bracknell's hutted accommodation will not be attractive, especially as the college depends so much on foreign students, who, whatever one may think, depend on the kudos of coming to Camberley, which has a world reputation. It could practically be done at Camberley. Will he reconsider that?

Mr. Soames: No, I will not reconsider. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the matter with me—he has already done so by letter—but the tri-service staff college will form up initially at Bracknell. It may not be as smart as it has been and for a couple of years it may not be as comfortable, but the reason why so many of our foreign friends choose to come to the staff college of all three services and the tri-service staff college is not because of the beautiful surroundings, but because the training is undoubtedly the best in the world. The tri-service staff college will continue that formidable record of training. I am familiar with the views of the people at the staff college at Camberley. Those were not the views that were presented to me when I was there last week.

Mr. Wilkinson: May I make it absolutely clear to my hon. Friend that I am not harping back to the dispute, or the argument, about staff college training, but referring specifically to the possibility of a tri-service officer cadet college at Greenwich—perhaps operated in co-operation with the university of Greenwich—in relation to the use of those fine buildings for an educational purpose, especially as the professional training at the three individual service academies of Cranwell, Sandhurst and Dartmouth is so truncated that officer cadets do not receive enough grounding in the basic disciplines and military sciences that are required for a long-term career?

Mr. Soames: I was aware of what my hon. Friend was suggesting and that there is no suggestion that we can do that at Greenwich, but I was saying that it is an interesting proposition that has not been advanced before. I would be happy if he would let me have details of his idea and I will consider whether I can take it forward.

I am grateful for the comments by my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) whose knowledge of this matter cannot be gainsaid and who had considerable experience of and responsibility for part of the national heritage when he was Minister. It is right that there is a proper debate on Greenwich; such a debate was needed. After all, as the hon. Member for Greenwich rightly says and as we all agree—no one disagrees—the collection of buildings there is one of, if not the most, important in the United Kingdom.

I am surprised that the hon. Member for Greenwich is so sceptical, but I suppose that his commercial snobbery is getting the better of him. He is unkind to poor Mr. Rutley. I am also surprised that the hon. Gentleman is sceptical as he said, halfway through his speech, that he believes that the Government's approach is a triumph of common sense, with which I entirely agree.

I sympathise with the concerns that the hon. Gentleman is expressing in the amendment. We took considerable care to table in the Select Committee an amendment that is now included in clause 27, which ensures that, as far as possible, the wider interests of heritage and access are reflected in future decisions on the Royal Naval college.

It is important to remember that the Secretary of State is holding the land as trustee. The clause seeks to achieve a proper balance between the private interests of a charity, which the Secretary of State must seek to safeguard, and the wider public interest. It lists considerations to which he must have regard in exercising discretion, but they cannot be conditions to be satisfied as the amendment seeks.

On a more technical point, although the clause requires the Secretary of State to have regard to various matters, it does not contain any objectives. Thus, the amendment is technically incompatible with the clause and would not work. For those reasons, I must ask the Committee to reject the hon. Gentleman's amendment.

6.15 pm

Mr. Raynsford: I am disappointed with the Minister's response, which revealed a characteristic inability to grapple with the key issue: although the safeguards are spelled out in clause 27(2), there is no direct link between subsection(2) and the powers under subsection(3) to grant a lease. That is why we believe that the amendment is necessary.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) for his support for the amendment's principle. I regret that the Government do not recognise the need to do this. I trust that their assurances will be honoured. We will examine whether the particular commitments that have been given are met before any leases are granted. The other place may wish to reconsider the issue; it has certainly taken considerable interest in Greenwich's future. In order, however, to not detain the Committee further—hon. Members want to raise many other matters of concern—I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 27 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New clause 4

GRANTS FOR PRESERVATION OF ROYAL NAVAL COLLEGE SITE

'. After section 31 of the National Heritage Act 1983 there shall be inserted the following section—

"The Royal Naval College

Grants for preservation of Royal Naval College site

31A.—(1) The Secretary of State may out of money provided by Parliament make grants towards expenditure in connection with the repair or maintenance of—

(a) the land and buildings on the site known as the Royal Naval College; or

(b) any object of historical interest situated on that land or in those buildings.

(2) Grants under this section may be paid to such persons and on such conditions as the Secretary of State considers appropriate." '.—*[Mr. Soames.]*

Brought up, read the First and Second time, and added to the Bill.

Clauses 28 to 31 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 5

MINOR AND CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS

Amendments made: No. 57, in page 47, leave out lines 27 to 32.

No. 58, in page 47, leave out lines 33 to 36 and insert—

'Suspension of sentences

.—(1) In section 120 of each of the 1955 Acts (suspension of sentences of imprisonment and detention)—

(a) in subsection (2), for the words from the beginning to "officer" there shall be substituted the "On passing such a sentence, the court";

(b) for subsection (3) there shall be substituted the following subsection—

"(3) On the review of a sentence which is not for the time being suspended, the reviewing authority may order that the balance of the sentence be suspended."; and

(c) in subsection (5)(c), for the words from "neither" to "said powers" there shall be substituted the words "the court does not exercise the powers conferred by paragraph (a) above".

(2) In section 118 (commencement of sentences of imprisonment and detention), in the proviso to subsection (2), for the words "the confirming officer" there shall be substituted the words "a court-martial".'.

No. 59, in page 47, line 36, at end insert—

'Remission of sentences

. In section 122 of each of the 1955 Acts (Imprisonment and Detention Rules), in subsection (1)(e) (rules about remission of part of sentences), the words "for good conduct and industry" shall cease to have effect.

. In section 82 of the 1957 Act (Naval Detention Quarters Rules), in subsection (1)(d) (rules about remission of part of sentences), the words "for good conduct and industry" shall cease to have effect.'

No. 60, in page 47, line 36, at end insert—

'Reviews

. In Schedule 5A to each of the 1955 Acts (powers of court on trial of civilians), in paragraph 13(3), for the words "section 108" in both places they appear there shall be substituted the words "section 113".

. In Schedule 4A to the 1957 Act (powers of court on trial of civilians), in paragraph 13(3), for the words "section 70(2)" there shall be substituted the words "section 70(1)".

. In Schedule 3 to the Armed Forces Act 1976 (Standing Civilian Courts)—

(a) in paragraph 19 (petitions for reviews), the words from "but" to "period" shall cease to have effect; and

(b) in paragraph 20 (reviews of findings and sentences), in sub-paragraph (2)(c), for the words from "a confirming" to "section 110" there shall be substituted the words "an authority carrying out a review under section 115".'.

No. 61, in page 47, leave out lines 38 to 40.

No. 62, in page 47, line 41, leave out 'that' and insert 'the 1957'.

No. 63, in page 48, line 14, at end insert—

'Abolition of confirmation

. In section 82(2) of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (meaning of references to conviction before a Service court in Part VIII), for the words from "references" (in the second place it appears) to "and" there shall be substituted the words "references to a finding of guilty which is, or falls to be treated as, the finding of the court; and".'.

. In Article 70(2) of the Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 (meaning of references to conviction before a Service court in Part IX), for the words from "references" (in the second place it appears) to the end there shall be substituted the words "references to a finding of guilty which is, or falls to be treated as, the finding of the court."'.—*[Mr. Soames.]*

Schedule 5, as amended, agreed to.

Schedule 6

REPEALS

Amendments made: No. 64, in page 48, line 16, at end insert—

'PART

REPEALS RELATING TO CHANGES TO PROCEDURE FOR DEALING WITH OFFENCES UNDER SERVICES ACTS

1933 c. 6.	Visiting Forces (British Commonwealth) Act 1933.	In section 4(4)(b) the words from "and may" to "courts martial".
1955 c. 18.	Army Act 1955.	Sections 77 to 80. Section 82(3). Section 84. Section 85(3). Sections 86 to 90. In section 91(1), the words from "and the convening officer" to the end. In section 93, in subsection (1), the words "other than an exempted person" and "judge advocate", and subsection (1A). Section 95(4). In section 96(5), the words from "or on" to "finding". Sections 104 to 106. Section 139. In section 143(1), the definition of "convening officer". In section 209(3), paragraph (d) and, in paragraph (fa), the words "constituted under section 87 above" and "constituted under section 88 above". In section 225(1), the definition of "Rules of Procedure".
1955 c. 19.	Air Force Act 1955.	Sections 77 to 80. Section 82(3). Section 84. Section 85(3). Sections 86 to 90. In section 91(1), the words from "and the convening officer" to the end. In section 93, in subsection (1), the words "other than an exempted person" and "judge advocate", and subsection (1A). Section 95(4). In section 96(5), the words from "or on" to "finding". Sections 104 to 106. Section 139. In section 143(1), the definition of "convening officer".

		In section 209(3), paragraph (d) and, in paragraph (fa), the words "constituted under section 87 above" and "constituted under section 88 above".
		In section 223(1), the definition of "Rules of Procedure".
1957 c. 53.	Naval Discipline Act 1957.	Sections 49, 50, 52A, 53 and 55.
		In section 56(2), the words from "and shall" to the end.
		In section 57, subsections (1) and (3).
		Section 59(5).
		In section 76(6)(a), the words from "by the officer" to the end.
		In Schedule 4, in paragraph 4, the words from "and subsections" to "not apply".
1966 c. 45.	Armed Forces Act 1966.	Sections 24, 30 and 31.
1967 c. 80.	Criminal Justice Act 1967.	In section 12, the words "or orders".
1976 c. 52.	Armed Forces Act 1976.	Section 5.
		In Schedule 3, in paragraph 1, the definition of "directing officer", in paragraph 2(2), the words from "if so" to "direction", paragraph 4(5), paragraph 7, in paragraph 12(4)(h), the words "and the directing officer", paragraph 12(4)(m) and, in paragraph 18(10), the words "or as judge advocate".
1984 c. 60.	Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984.	In section 72(1), in paragraph (b)(i) of the definition of "proceedings", the words from "or from" to "1957".
		In section 82(1), in paragraph (b)(i) of the definition of "proceedings", the words from "or from" to "1957".

No. 65, in page 48, line 22, column 3, after '"and"' insert

'(in the first place in which it appears)'.

No. 66, in page 48, line 26, column 3, leave out from beginning to end of line 30.

No. 67, in page 48, leave out line 31.

No. 68, in page 48, line 32, column 3, leave out 'subsection (2)'.

No. 69, in page 49, line 51, column 3, after '"and"' insert

'(in the first place it appears)'.

No. 70, in page 49, line 55, column 3, leave out from beginning to end of line 6 on page 50.

No. 71, in page 50, leave out line 7.

No. 72, in page 50, line 8, column 3, leave out 'subsection (2)'.

No. 73, in page 51, line 16, at end insert—

'1957 c. 53.	Naval Discipline Act 1957.	In Schedule 4A, in paragraph 4(12), the words "confirming officer or", in paragraph 5(2)(b), the words "confirmation, revision or" and, in paragraph 15, in subparagraph (4), the words "confirmation" and "or revision", and, in subparagraphs (5), (6) and (7), the words "confirmation" and "revision".'.

No. 74, in page 51, line 46, column 3, at end insert—

'In section 122(1)(e), the words "for good conduct and industry".'.

No. 75, in page 52, line 4, column 3, at end insert—

'In section 122(1)(e), the words "for good conduct and industry".'.

No. 76, in page 52, line 6, column 3, at end insert—

'In section 82(1)(d), the words "for good conduct and industry".'.

No. 77, in page 52, line 13, column 3, leave out from 'Service,"' to end of line 16.

No. 78, in page 52, line 42, column 3, at end insert—

'In Schedule 3, in paragraph 19, the words from "but" to "period".'.

No. 79, in page 52, line 44, at end insert—

'1976 c. 74.	Race Relations Act 1976.	In section 54(2), the words "or to a complaint to which section 75(8) applies".'.

—[Mr. Soames.]

Schedule 6, as amended, agreed to.

Clause 32 ordered to stand of the Bill.

New clause 2

POSTPONEMENT OF SENTENCES OF COURTS–MARTIAL

'.—(1) After section 120 of the Army Act 1955 there shall be inserted the following section—

"Postponement of sentences

120A.—(1) On passing any sentence a court–martial may order that the sentence shall not have effect until the end of the period specified in the order.

(2) On reviewing a sentence under section 113 of this Act, the reviewing authority may—

(a) if the sentence has not had effect, order that the sentence shall not have effect until the end of the period specified in the order;

(b) if the sentence has had effect, order that the sentence shall cease to have effect on the making of the order until the end of the period specified in the order.

(3) On exercising any power under section 113AA of this Act to pass or substitute a sentence, the reviewing authority may order that the sentence shall not have effect until the end of the period specified in the order.

(4) The Defence Council or any officer authorised by them may terminate the period specified in an order under this section or extend such a period for a further period specified by them.

(5) On the termination of such a period the sentence in respect of which the order in question was made shall have effect or (in the case of an order under subsection (2)(b) above) resume effect.

(6) Nothing in this section shall be taken to prevent section 118(1) of this Act from applying in relation to a military sentence of imprisonment or detention."

(2) After section 120 of the Air Force Act 1955 there shall be inserted the following section—

"Postponement of sentences

120A.—(1) On passing any sentence a court–martial may order that the sentence shall not have effect until the end of the period specified in the order.

(2) On reviewing a sentence under section 113 of this Act, the reviewing authority may—

(a) if the sentence has not had effect, order that the sentence shall not have effect until the end of the period specified in the order;

(b) if the sentence has had effect, order that the sentence shall cease to have effect on the making of the order until the end of the period specified in the order.

(3) On exercising any power under section 113AA of this Act to pass or substitute a sentence, the reviewing authority may order that the sentence shall not have effect until the end of the period specified in the order.

(4) The Defence Council or any officer authorised by them may terminate the period specified in an order under this section or extend such a period for a further period specified by them.

(5) On the termination of such a period the sentence in respect of which the order in question was made shall have effect or (in the case of an order under subsection (2)(b) above) resume effect.

(6) Nothing in this section shall be taken to prevent section 118(1) of this Act from applying in relation to an air–force sentence of imprisonment or detention."

(3) After section 89 of the 1957 Act there shall be inserted the following section—

"Postponement of sentences

Postponement of sentences

89A.—(1) On passing any sentence a court–martial may order that the sentence shall not have effect until the end of the period specified in the order.

(2) On reviewing a sentence under section 70 of this Act, the reviewing authority may—

(a) if the sentence has not had effect, order that the sentence shall not have effect until the end of the period specified in the order;

(b) if the sentence has had effect, order that the sentence shall cease to have effect on the making of the order until the end of the period specified in the order.

(3) On exercising any power under section 71 of this Act to pass or substitute a sentence, the reviewing authority may order that the sentence shall not have effect until the end of the period specified in the order.

(4) The Defence Council or any officer authorised by them may terminate the period specified in an order under this section or extend such a period for a further period specified by them.

(5) On the termination of such a period the sentence in respect of which the order in question was made shall have effect or (in the case of an order under subsection (2)(b) above) resume effect.

(6) Nothing in this section shall be taken to prevent section 85(1) of this Act from applying in relation to a sentence of imprisonment or detention awarded under this Act." '.—*[Mr. Soames.]*

Brought up, read the First and Second time, and added to the Bill.

New clause 6

PARDON FOR GREAT WAR SOLDIERS

'.—(1) Any person (an "eligible person") who in the Great War of 1914 to 1919—

(a) served in the British Empire Forces,

(b) was convicted by a court martial of one or more of the offences set out in subsection (2) below or any of these offences together with any other offences, and

(c) was judicially executed following such conviction

shall be eligible for a pardon in accordance with the provisions of this section in respect of any offence referred to in subsection (2) below.

(2) The offences referred to in subsection (1) above are cowardice, desertion, attempted desertion, disobedience, quitting post, violence, sleeping at post, throwing away arms and striking a superior officer.

(3) An eligible person shall be pardoned of any offence referred to in subsection (2) above if the Secretary of State makes an order to that effect in accordance with the provisions of this section.

(4) Within one year of the passing of this Act the Secretary of State shall, in respect of each eligible person, either—

(i) make an order under subsection (3) above; or

(ii) lay a report before both Houses of Parliament explaining the reasons for his decision not to make such an order.

(5) A pardon under this section shall—

(a) have similar effect to a pardon granted in exercise of the Royal Prerogative,

(b) be deemed to remove or, as the case may be, nullify any degradations and penalties imposed in connection with the relevant offences, and

(c) not have any effect on any existing financial rights or obligations of any dependant or of the Secretary of State.

(6) The power to make an order under this section shall be exercisable by statutory instrument, and a copy of any order so made shall be laid before each House of Parliament.'.—*[Mr. Mackinlay.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

The First Deputy Chairman (Sir Geoffrey Lofthouse): With this, it will be convenient to discuss also amendment No. 82, in title, line 8, after 'forces', insert

'to make provision for pardoning soldiers convicted of certain offences during the Great War of 1914 to 1919'.

Mr. Mackinlay: My new clause would require the Secretary of State for Defence to issue pardons in respect of just over 300 soldiers of the British empire forces who

were executed in the first world war having been found guilty of offences ranging from cowardice, desertion, sleeping at their post, disobedience, throwing away arms and hitting a superior officer. I believe that pardons are long overdue, and it is my submission that that is the view of the overwhelming majority of the people of the United Kingdom.

If my new clause were incorporated into the Bill, and the Secretary of State took a different view, he would be required to come to Parliament to demonstrate why he considered it inappropriate in each case to issue a pardon. I believe—I am confident about this—that, if there were to be an objective examination of the cases, in a matter of minutes people would conclude that a grave injustice had been done to those men all those years ago.

Why do I say that? All 300 of those men were denied the right of natural justice. They were not given an opportunity to prepare a defence. In many cases, they did not have proper advocates, and none of them was given the opportunity to collect evidence, particularly medical evidence, in support of their defence. Above all, each and every one of those soldiers was denied the opportunity to appeal against the sentence of death. I believe that that is contrary to the rules of natural justice.

For 75 years, it suited the British establishment to keep the documents of the field courts martial under lock and key. They were suppressed at the Public Record Office. When they became available for public inspection by scholars or relatives, it was obvious that there had been a travesty of justice. The British establishment acknowledges that things were bad, but argues that it is too late to provide a remedy. That is not good enough. The documents demand that, as a country, we recognise the terrible wrong done to those men. We need to put the record straight.

The documents show that the decision to find those men guilty was perverse in many cases because there was documentation showing that many of them had been hospitalised because they had been sick and traumatised and were forcibly returned to the trenches.

I am thinking particularly of Harry Farr of the West Yorkshire regiment. I had the privilege of meeting his widow, Gertie Batstone—she married again—in her 99th year. Throughout her long life, that wonderful woman sought recognition for her husband as a brave soldier: a volunteer who endured the trauma of the trenches not just for months but for two years or more. After being shelled, he simply could not go on. He was hospitalised, but was forced to return to the front, and when he was told to go forward, he broke away from his escorts trembling. The "trembling" is documented in the field court martial records. Despite that, that poor man and many like him had to face a firing squad at dawn.

It is time we put the record straight. We spend millions of pounds every year teaching history to our schoolchildren and students, and we need to write that history with clarity and precision, including those s which are uncomfortable for us—this is one of them. We can write the history and put the record straight by granting pardons to those men.

I have written to the Prime Minister about this on a number of occasions, and, with characteristic courtesy, he expressed sympathy, but declined to recommend to Her Majesty the Queen that there should be pardons or that action should be taken in the House. I regret that. His argument was that it is a matter of history, and that we cannot apply our standards to those of 75 years ago.

The principles of English law, that people should have a fair trial, be able to prepare a defence and be able to appeal against sentence, were not invented after 1918. They are the basic principles of English law since long before, and were denied to those men in our century.

It is nonsense to say that it is merely a matter of history. I am not seeking pardons for soldiers executed in the Crimean or Napoleonic wars. These events occurred in our century. Every November, the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and many of us go to the Cenotaph and other war memorials to pay our respects to those who died in wars in this century.

I hope that it will be taken in the correct spirit when I say that Her Majesty the Queen Mother still goes to the Cenotaph, and she is of this century. She mourns the death of many of her contemporaries, as well as her late brother who died in the first world war. As long as there are first world war veterans alive—there are still a few thousand—as well as their widows, and sons and daughters, it is relevant to us. It is not too late to provide a remedy.

I appeal to the Secretary of State to reflect on this. Service men and women and those who have endured hardship and suffered from shell shock in subsequent conflicts share my view that it would be a matter of pride for our generation and the House if we were to conclude this matter by granting pardons. It might mean that we could draw a final line across a century that has been full of trauma and great distress. Some of those events were triggered in the summer of 1914 and, in some senses, are still with us today in s of central Europe—hopefully, they will conclude soon. It is time we recognised that we have the capacity and the duty to respect those men as brave British soldiers who did their best in the most difficult circumstances.

Lord Moran, famous as the doctor of Winston Churchill—the Minister's grandfather—was a physician in the first world war. In his memoirs, he referred to the bank of courage that each man and woman has. He said that one draws on that bank of courage, and that eventually none is left. He said that the men who suffered combat stress had often demonstrated immense skill and courage and endured terrible hardships, including sleep deprivation and lack of food, and that eventually they could not go on.

We must recognise that it is now appropriate for the Government and the House of Commons to say that those were brave British soldiers and should be recognised as such. Those who would have been their dependants require it, and, albeit late in the evening of their lives, their comrades in arms who still survive from the first world war will derive great satisfaction from knowing that at last the nation has exonerated their colleagues.

A couple of weeks ago, Lord Houghton of Sowerby, who fought at Passchendaele, passed away. I greatly regret that he could not have been here tonight to hear me and the rest of the debate. I remember a relatively recent conversation with him in which he spoke about the horrors of Passchendaele, and said that he supported my campaign to have the pardons granted. He said that it went to the heart of his Christian belief in compassion and forgiveness, but at the word "forgiveness" he paused and added, "If forgiveness is appropriate." Those were brave

[Mr. Mackinlay]

men who had done their best and who did nothing wrong. It is time that the Members of the House of Commons joined together in honouring them.

I do not know whether it is true that Conservative Members may be subject to some kind of Whip, but I still hope that tonight they will feel that this is where we exercise our consciences, and that the Committee can act as a fulcrum and focal point for the nation's will—and I hope that they will support me in the Division Lobby.

6.30 pm

Mr. Wilkinson: We all admire the immense compassion of the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) and greatly respect his motivation and the feeling with which he spoke. None of us can fully comprehend the horrors of service in the great war; it is deeply imprinted on the conscience of the nation.

Nevertheless, I do not believe that the House of Commons can retroactively pass such a provision, however noble the motivation. Each generation of service men and women has to carry out its service of duty to the Crown according to the service Acts that appertain at the time. That is why we are debating the Armed Forces Bill today, to bring service discipline into line with contemporary morality and the ethos of the nation as a whole.

How, in all equity, can we exonerate those men, many of whom were probably wrongly convicted, but some of whom may have been rightly convicted? How can we do that without a full appreciation of the circumstances—and without a full realisation that examples had to be made, and perhaps on occasion martyrs had to be made, to ensure the discipline and cohesion of whole units?

How can we single out that group of service men for exoneration, when, through the generations and the centuries, many service men have been executed for apparent dereliction of duty? Sailors in Nelson's Navy were keel-hauled or whipped to death with cats-o'-nine-tails. That does not look very fine or appropriate today, according to our codes of discipline and behaviour, but it was necessary for Nelson's Navy, to secure the victories it won. If we remember the mutinies that took place in the French army in 1917, we may conclude that on occasion such measures may have been unpleasant necessities.

I marvel that, in the circumstances, only 300 men had to be executed. So many will have been shell-shocked and traumatised beyond all rational behaviour, but according to the exigencies of the service of the day, their commanders had no choice if their units were to be effective and lives were to be saved. Much as I admire the motivation of the hon. Member for Thurrock, I urge the Committee not to accept his new clause.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): As one who has a personal connection with 1915 and Gallipoli—my grandfather was involved—I am extremely angry about the speech that we have just heard by the hon. Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson). There is a simple response to what he said about retrospection. My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) mentioned Lord Houghton, and when the retrospection arguments were put to him, Lord Houghton said one thing: "I was at Passchendaele."

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Even according to the exigencies of the time, the decisions to kill those 300 men were savage. We are not talking about something that happened long ago in history. My father fought in that war, and it was a cruel and bitter experience that left him a broken man for the rest of his life. Two things that were available in great quantities during the first world war were alcohol and tobacco, and it is not insignificant that my father died of lung cancer at the age of 43.

When we consider the 300 deaths, we know that other armies did not find it necessary to kill their own soldiers, and they had equally heroic war records. It is right that we in the Committee should try to do a little, even if it is only symbolic, to undo the terrible injustices that were committed in the name of the House and of the sovereign of the day. We should support my hon. Friend's new clause and do a little to absolve the House and our country of the guilt of those 300 deaths.

Dr. Godman: We have heard a disgraceful speech by the hon. Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson). My late father, who was awarded the military medal for what was defined as "bravery in the field" on the western front in 1917, always deeply deplored the actions of the appallingly arrogant officers who sent deeply traumatised young men to their deaths. Let us all vote for the new clause.

Mr. Tony Banks (Newham, North–West): I thought that the speech by the hon. Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) was lacking in compassion, and I was quite surprised that he should have made such a speech. A few yards from here, there is an equestrian statue of Lord Haig, who was one of those who sent millions of young men to their deaths, often needlessly. Such people were honoured for what they did, yet they are the sort of people who should be arraigned before the High Court of Parliament, even today. Remembering what was done, the hon. Gentleman should show some compassion and support the new clause.

Dr. Reid: I have sat through many defence debates, and have had many discussions with the hon. Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson), and I have great respect for him and for his integrity, but he may come to regret what may have been loose phraseology in his speech today. We are talking about something that happened this century, not about Trafalgar in 1805. The idea that serving British soldiers should be shot "pour encourager les autres" is anathema to the British tradition, and it should stay that way.

I recall that, in a small museum in the Falkland islands, I spoke to people who contrasted the relationship between the British officers and men who fought together in extremely difficult circumstances with the relationship between the Argentine officers and their men, who had suffered so much throughout the battle. Conscripts were forced into the freezing sea for 15 hours at a time in the sights of their commanding officers' guns "pour encourager les autres", and starved for days in foxholes while their officers had chocolate and brandy. If that was

ever the British way, surely it is not the British way now. We must remember what these people were going through.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): I have the highest respect for the hon. Gentleman, but will he place clearly on the record whether he believes that the picture that he paints of the Argentines in the Falklands can also be applied to the British officer corps during the first world war? If that is his view, there really is a profound divide across the Committee on this matter.

Dr. Reid: It was not I who wrote the book "The Donkeys". It was a former member of the Government that the hon. Gentleman supported—indeed, a former Defence Minister. He wrote the book based on the perhaps trivial but penetrating quip that the soldiers in the British armed forces in the first world war were "lions led by donkeys". In one afternoon—before tea time—on the first day of the assault on the Somme, 50,000 British soldiers died. That is equivalent to the entire front line of our armed services today. Such killing went on day after day, month after month.

Someone made mistakes, but that is not the issue. Mistakes are made in war, and I have the highest regard for the military traditions of the officer corps of the British armed forces. What my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) was speaking about with passion were not the mistakes that can be made even by the brightest general in the fog of war, but injustice.

Injustice within living memory should not stay unremedied. Hon. Members, particularly those who support the armed forces, must realise that the bond that binds the United Kingdom as a nation is the contract between the present and the past. Dead those men may be, but the sons, the daughters and the grandchildren of those who received a medal in the first world war are still proud to display it. The stigma of an execution and the accusations levelled against a grandfather must be borne by the families of those who were executed.

This is a piece of enabling legislation. It does not require us to pardon if we cannot do so. It obliges us, after three quarters of a century, to repay the debt of honour that this House surely owes to some of those men who fought and died—some, tragically, by the bullets of their own armed forces—to save this country. If we do not discharge that debt of honour now for the past, we can hardly demand it of our service men and women in the future.

Mr. Soames: I am grateful to have the opportunity to respond to the points made in the debate. I recognise the strength of feeling that this issue raises in the House and with members of the public.

It is impossible not to have the deepest sympathy for those men and their families. The war was fought in appalling conditions and many of those involved endured terrible suffering. My hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) made an important speech. His uncle fought at Gallipoli, was wounded seven times in the first world war, and was awarded the croix de guerre.

One should not seek to encourage the introduction of a competitive aspect to the debate. Every family represented in the Committee will have had those who, in previous generations, suffered the most appalling losses and gross tragedies. The Somme, Passchendaele and Vimy ridge all left a trail of destruction and sadness, that will never be obliterated from the history of this country.

Between August 1914 and March 1919, more than 141,000 officers and soldiers were convicted by courts martial for a wide range of offences, of whom 346 were executed. The remainder received sentences ranging from life imprisonment and hard labour at one end of the spectrum, to fines and stoppages of pay at the other.

The new clause does not seek to obtain pardons for all those executed, and I freely acknowledge that. It excludes the 40 service men sentenced to death for mutiny or murder. The vast majority of executions were for desertions, but soldiers were also sentenced for cowardice, quitting a post, disobedience, striking an officer, casting away arms and sleeping at a post. They included men drawn from Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, the West Indies, Nigeria, Egypt, the then Gold Coast and China.

Of the 346 who suffered death, 91 were already under suspended sentences. Of those, 40 had been previously sentenced to death for desertion or other offences. One soldier had been sentenced to death on two previous occasions for desertion and, in nine cases, the accused were under two or more suspended sentences.

I do not accept the view that these men were denied a fair trial in accordance with the rules of natural justice. There is sufficient information available to show that the courts martial were properly convened and conducted, and that the decisions of the courts were referred to a higher authority for confirmation in the correct way. There is no evidence that the convictions were unsound or that the accused soldiers were treated unfairly by the standards prevailing at the time. I know that the hon. Member for Thurrock understands that point.

There are no grounds for considering a posthumous pardon where there is evidence to justify the court's findings of guilty and where the court had passed a sentence which was lawful and within its jurisdiction. It is not sufficient to argue that pardons should be granted merely on the grounds that those sentenced to death did not have their sentences mitigated or remitted. There was an alternative punishment to the death penalty, and a majority of those soldiers sentenced to death by courts martial during the period had their sentences commuted.

6.45 pm

Clearly there may well have been cases in which a modern court would not have convicted the accused soldier. Medical evidence as to the state of mind of the individual soldier—whether the offence was desertion, murder or mutiny—may be crucial in a modern court. That evidence is not available from the files, although I acknowledge the point made by the hon. Member for Thurrock about the book by Lord Moran and the "bank of courage". Lord Moran was the first doctor to recognise the very serious problems of stress and other disturbances in battle.

I recognise that, with the passage of time, attitudes may change, but I am not convinced that legislation for pardons is the right way to reflect the fact that some people might now disagree with the laws and procedures in force at the time under different circumstances. The files of 89 per cent. of the cases where sentence of death

[Mr. Soames]

was commuted have not survived. This is unfortunate, since, in isolation, the comments of the confirming officers from divisional and corps commanders upwards to the commander-in-chief in the 11 per cent. of cases where sentence was confirmed, may appear to be harsh. Apart from the desire to set an example—not always spelt out in court martial records—it is clear that an important factor in confirmation was whether the actions of the accused were deliberate.

The rules that applied during the first world war differ from those now governing the conduct of courts martial. However, these soldiers were convicted by a properly constituted court, according to the laws and procedures of the land, of an offence punishable by the imposition of the death penalty. That we do things differently today cannot alter that fact, uncomfortable as it might be for many of us, including the hon. Member for Thurrock. He has waged a good and honourable campaign for those men, and I know that he will not accept that.

This is an issue that does not lend itself to easy solutions, and the debate tonight—although heated—has been restrained and dignified. Perhaps the initial reaction of many of us is to be sympathetic to the sensible campaign of the hon. Member for Thurrock. However, as I have sought to explain, his solution does not seem to the Government to be the most appropriate one, and I must, with regret, ask the Committee to reject the new clause.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 129, Noes 203.

Division No. 124] **[6.48 pm**

AYES

Alton, David
Anderson, Ms Janet *(Ros'dale)*
Armstrong, Hilary
Banks, Tony *(Newham NW)*
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Beckett, Rt Hon Margaret
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Betts, Clive
Boateng, Paul
Bottomley, Peter *(Eltham)*
Bowden, Sir Andrew
Bradley, Keith
Bray, Dr Jeremy
Brown, N *(N'c'tle upon Tyne E)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burden, Richard
Byers, Stephen
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Carlile, Alexander *(Montgomery)*
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clark, Dr David *(South Shields)*
Clarke, Tom *(Monklands W)*
Clwyd, Mrs Ann
Coffey, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Alistair
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Bryan *(Oldham C'tral)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham, H'dge H'l)*
Denham, John
Dewar, Donald
Dixon, Don
Dobson, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Etherington, Bill
Fatchett, Derek
Field, Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foulkes, George
Fraser, John
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Garrett, John
George, Bruce
Gerrard, Neil
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mildred
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Harvey, Nick
Henderson, Doug
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hoey, Kate
Howarth, Alan *(Strat'rd-on-A)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley North)*
Hoyle, Doug
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Glenda *(H'stead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Sheffld, H)*
Janner, Greville
Jones, Lynne *(B'ham S O)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd, SW)*
Jowell, Tessa
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross,C&S)*
Kennedy, Jane *(L'pool Br'dg'n)*
Lloyd, Tony *(Stretford)*
Loyden, Eddie
McFall, John
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclennan, Robert
McMaster, Gordon
McNamara, Kevin
Madden, Max
Marek, Dr John
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Michael, Alun
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Morris, Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Paul
Oakes, Rt Hon Gordon
O'Brien, Mike *(N W'kshire)*
Olner, Bill
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Bridget *(Lew'm E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Quin, Ms Joyce
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Dr John
Rendel, David
Ross, William *(E Londonderry)*
Salmond, Alex
Sedgemore, Brian
Short, Clare
Simpson, Alan
Smith, Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Chris *(Is'ton S & F'sbury)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Spearing, Nigel
Spellar, John
Straw, Jack
Timms, Stephen
Turner, Dennis
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Wallace, James
Wareing, Robert N
Watson, Mike
Wicks, Malcolm
Wray, Jimmy

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Terry Lewis and
Mr. Dennis Skinner.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(East Surrey)*
Alexander, Richard
Alison, Rt Hon Michael *(Selby)*
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, James
Arnold, Jacques *(Gravesham)*
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Nicholas *(North Dorset)*
Banks, Matthew *(Southport)*
Bellingham, Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Booth, Hartley
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Rt Hon Virginia
Bowis, John
Boyson, Rt Hon Sir Rhodes
Brandreth, Gyles
Brazier, Julian
Bright, Sir Graham
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Brown, M *(Brigg & Cl'thorpes)*
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burns, Simon
Burt, Alistair
Campbell, Menzies *(Fife NE)*
Carlisle, John *(Luton North)*
Carlisle, Sir Kenneth *(Lincoln)*
Carrington, Matthew
Carttiss, Michael
Cash, William
Channon, Rt Hon Paul
Chapman, Sir Sydney
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Ru'cliff)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coe, Sebastian
Colvin, Michael
Congdon, David
Coombs, Anthony *(Wyre For'st)*
Coombs, Simon *(Swindon)*
Cope, Rt Hon Sir John
Couchman, James
Cran, James
Currie, Mrs Edwina *(S D'by'ire)*
Davies, Quentin *(Stamford)*
Davis, David *(Boothferry)*
Day, Stephen
Dover, Den
Duncan, Alan
Dunn, Bob
Durant, Sir Anthony
Dykes, Hugh
Eggar, Rt Hon Tim
Evans, David *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Evans, Jonathan *(Brecon)*
Evans, Nigel *(Ribble Valley)*
Evans, Roger *(Monmouth)*
Evennett, David
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fenner, Dame Peggy
Field, Barry *(Isle of Wight)*
Fishburn, Dudley
Forman, Nigel
Forth, Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam *(Woodspring)*
Freeman, Rt Hon Roger
French, Douglas
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gill, Christopher
Goodlad, Rt Hon Alastair
Goodson-Wickes, Dr Charles
Greenway, Harry *(Ealing N)*
Greenway, John *(Ryedale)*
Griffiths, Peter *(Portsmouth, N)*
Grylls, Sir Michael
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archibald
Hanley, Rt Hon Jeremy
Hargreaves, Andrew
Harris, David
Haselhurst, Sir Alan

Hawkins, Nick
Hawksley, Warren
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hendry, Charles
Higgins, Rt Hon Sir Terence
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howell, Sir Ralph *(N Norfolk)*
Hughes, Robert G *(Harrow W)*
Hunt, Rt Hon David *(Wirral W)*
Hunt, Sir John *(Ravensbourne)*
Jack, Michael
Johnson Smith, Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Robert B *(W Hertfdshr)*
Key, Robert
Kirkhope, Timothy
Kirkwood, Archy
Knapman, Roger
Knight, Mrs Angela *(Erewash)*
Knight, Rt Hon Greg *(Derby N)*
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamont, Rt Hon Norman
Lawrence, Sir Ivan
Legg, Barry
Lennox-Boyd, Sir Mark
Lidington, David
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Lord, Michael
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Madel, Sir David
Maitland, Lady Olga
Malone, Gerald
Mans, Keith
Marlow, Tony
Marshall, Sir Michael *(Arundel)*
Mates, Michael
Mayhew, Rt Hon Sir Patrick
Mellor, Rt Hon David
Merchant, Piers
Mills, Iain
Mitchell, Andrew *(Gedling)*
Mitchell, Sir David *(NW Hants)*
Nelson, Anthony
Neubert, Sir Michael
Newton, Rt Hon Tony
Nicholls, Patrick
Nicholson, David *(Taunton)*
Norris, Steve
Onslow, Rt Hon Sir Cranley
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Patnick, Sir Irvine
Patten, Rt Hon John
Pattie, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Pawsey, James
Pickles, Eric
Porter, David *(Waveney)*
Rathbone, Tim
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Richards, Rod
Riddick, Graham
Rifkind, Rt Hon Malcolm
Robathan, Andrew
Roberts, Rt Hon Sir Wyn
Rowe, Andrew *(Mid Kent)*
Rumbold, Rt Hon Dame Angela
Sackville, Tom
Sainsbury, Rt Hon Sir Timothy
Shephard, Rt Hon Gillian
Shepherd, Sir Colin *(Hereford)*
Shersby, Sir Michael
Skeet, Sir Trevor
Soames, Nicholas
Spencer, Sir Derek
Spicer, Sir James *(W Dorset)*
Spicer, Sir Michael *(S Worcs)*
Spink, Dr Robert
Squire, Robin *(Hornchurch)*
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Stephen, Michael
Streeter, Gary
Sweeney, Walter
Sykes, John
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy *(Southend, E)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomason, Roy
Thompson, Sir Donald *(C'er V)*
Thompson, Patrick *(Norwich N)*
Townend, John *(Bridlington)*
Townsend, Cyril D *(Bexl'yh'th)*
Tredinnick, David
Vaughan, Sir Gerard
Viggers, Peter
Waldegrave, Rt Hon William
Walden, George
Waller, Gary
Ward, John
Wardle, Charles *(Bexhill)*
Watts, John
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Ray
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Ann
Wiggin, Sir Jerry
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macc'fld)*
Wolfson, Mark
Wood, Timothy
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Derek Conway and
Mr. Patrick McLoughlin.

Question accordingly negatived.

New clause 7

PERSONS SUBJECT TO MILITARY LAW: GIBRALTAR

'. After section 207 of the Army Act 1955 there shall be inserted the following section—

"(1) Without prejudice to the generality of section 207 above, any person who is subject to military law by virtue of section 205(1)(a) to (j) of this Act and who is, whether temporarily or not, attached to the Gibraltar Regiment, shall for the duration of that attachment be subject to the discipline of the Commanding Officer of that Regiment.

(2) In this section, 'The Gibraltar Regiment' means the Regiment raised under the law of Gibraltar".'.—*[Mr. Colvin.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

7 pm

Mr. Michael Colvin (Romsey and Waterside): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

After the seriousness and the passion of the previous debate, hon. Members may feel that the matter to which new clause 7 refers is of little consequence. However, it is important to hon. Members who take an interest in Gibraltar and to the people of the Rock and it must be resolved. The issue relates to the powers of command of officers in the Gibraltar Regiment—specifically, their powers to discipline British soldiers who are on secondment to the Gibraltar Regiment.

I shall be brief, as I know that many hon. Members wish to speak to the next new clause. I think that it is important to give the House some background information about the Gibraltar Regiment which, following the rundown of British troops stationed in Gibraltar, is now the only resident battalion on the Rock. Its primary role is to oversee the security of the territory and its military installations, but it also has administrative responsibilities and ceremonial duties.

The regiment has its roots in the Gibraltar volunteer corps of the first world war, which was spontaneously formed by the people of Gibraltar. It developed directly from the Gibraltar defence force—a territorial unit of volunteers, which was raised in April 1939. The unit later trained national service men and became the Gibraltar Regiment, with its own commanding officer, in 1958.

The Gibraltar Regiment appears in the Army List as an integral part of the British Army. It is funded and trained by the Ministry of Defence to the same standard as any British infantry regiment. Its officers hold Governor's commissions and are trained on a par with United Kingdom officers who hold Queen's commissions. A number of the officers have served, and continue to serve, in attachments to United Kingdom regiments and at Army headquarters. Some served recently with North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and United Nations forces in the former Yugoslavia.

Inspecting officers consider the training, standard and efficiency of the Gibraltar Regiment to be as high as equivalent United Kingdom regiments. That is also the view of the Defence Committee, which visited the Rock recently, and Ministers who have inspected the force. The regiment conducts training in the United Kingdom every year and during that time United Kingdom regiments take over its duties in Gibraltar.

Ever since the Gibraltar defence force was raised in 1939, soldiers from United Kingdom regiments and corps have been seconded or attached to the unit. However, in 1990 it was discovered that the commanding officer of the Gibraltar Regiment has no powers of command over personnel from United Kingdom regiments or corps who are attached or seconded to that regiment. The present position is resented and I believe that it is prejudicial to good military discipline. For example, a warrant officer who was attached to the Gibraltar Regiment was returned to the United Kingdom because it was not possible to discipline him in Gibraltar.

The anomaly has been patched up by appointing, in parallel with the commanding officer of the Gibraltar Regiment, an officer of the United Kingdom forces who

[Mr. Michael Colvin]

is attached to the regiment or who serves in British forces headquarters. He acts as commanding officer for disciplinary purposes for United Kingdom soldiers who are attached to the regiment. That highly unsatisfactory stop-gap arrangement belittles the position of the regiment's commanding officer as it divides his command into two categories of soldiers: those over whom he can exercise full authority and those over whom he has no disciplinary powers. Notwithstanding that fact, the two categories are equally subject to the Army Act 1955. Obviously, it is not a sound way of exercising command in any British regiment.

The Defence Committee visited the Rock last October, when the matter was drawn to our attention not only by the Gibraltar Regiment but by the commander of British forces and by the Speaker of the House of Assembly, the Hon. Colonel Bob Peliza, who is the honorary colonel of the Gibraltar Regiment. I wrote to my hon. Friend the Minister of State for the Armed Forces, drawing his attention to the fact that the commanding officer of the Gibraltar Regiment does not have that power of command and that any British officer who is seconded to it cannot be disciplined by that regiment and must be either dealt with by the commander of British forces in Gibraltar or flown back to the United Kingdom for disciplinary action.

My hon. Friend replied to my letter, as did the Secretary of State for Defence, who acknowledged the existing anomaly. I wish to put on record my hon. Friend's response:

> "As you say, the Commanding Officer of the Gibraltar Regiment at present has no formal disciplinary powers over a soldier of the British Army seconded to it. The MOD's legal advisers are in the process of determining the most efficient legislative means to rectify this situation. I can assure you that this is proceeding as a matter of priority but the case of the Gibraltar Regiment is inextricably linked to wider legal questions concerning powers of command. These are complex issues of considerable importance which are likely to take some time to resolve."

The letter is dated 30 November last year. The issue has been outstanding since 1990 and, although it may be linked inextricably to other questions, the learned legal advisers should by now have found some legal formula to resolve the problem. If it is not resolved in this legislation, it will probably be five years before it is considered again. That is a good reason for setting the ball rolling this evening with new clause 7.

If the substance of the new clause is accepted, it will end an anomaly that has been detrimental to good order and military discipline in a regiment of Her Majesty's forces for five years. If we do nothing, it will continue to have that effect for another five years. I believe that we have a responsibility to put the matter right once and for all. That is the wish of the Army commanders who are directly responsible for the discipline and the proficiency of the Gibraltar Regiment, such as the commander of the British forces in Gibraltar and the director of infantry. Incidentally, it is also the view of Army Legal Services, which has urged action on that essentially purely legal technicality for five years.

My hon. Friend the Minister is a man of honour and I know that he will keep his word. He has said that he is dealing with the problem as a matter of urgency and I trust that this evening he will either support the new clause or give a firm undertaking that the Government will bring forward their own amendments in another place to address that long-standing difficulty.

Mr. Soames: I am grateful for the chance to reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Waterside (Mr. Colvin) and for our exchange of correspondence. I hope that he accepts that I replied in good faith, and I am happy to elaborate on my comments now.

The new clause seeks to place members of the United Kingdom forces who are attached to the Gibraltar Regiment under the command of the regiment's commanding officer for disciplinary purposes. That may seem logical at first sight, but to accept the new clause would run counter to the established practice of not allowing non-United Kingdom officers to have disciplinary powers over British troops—I know that my hon. Friend understands that definition.

I should explain that the commanding officer of the Gibraltar Regiment could be either a British officer or an officer of the regiment. In the latter case, the commanding officer would hold a Governor's commission rather than a Queen's commission. The current practice is that when the commanding officer is a member of the United Kingdom Regular forces, he has command over members of the UK Regular forces who are attached to the regiment, as well as over members of the colonial force. However, when the commanding officer is a member of the colonial force, disciplinary command over UK Regular Army personnel is vested in an officer on the staff of the headquarters in Gibraltar who holds a Regular Army land forces commission.

We want that practice to continue so that members of the UK Regular forces are under the disciplinary control of other members of the Regular forces, which will prevent them from potentially facing trial by a court martial composed of members of the colonial force or facing summary disposal by a person who is not a holder of the Queen's commission.

In acknowledging the espousal by my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Waterside of an issue that I know is dear to many people in Gibraltar, I am bound to tell him, I am afraid, that his new clause is unacceptable to the Government. However, the Government are actively considering the wider question of the status of the Gibraltar Regiment. If, as a result of that consideration, it is decided to alter that status and to make the regiment part of the UK Regular forces, disciplinary matters such as the issue that prompted my hon. Friend's new clause will fall into line.

I hope that my hon. Friend will be persuaded to withdraw his new clause. If not, I must ask the Committee to reject it.

Mr. Colvin: In the light of what my hon. Friend the Minister said, which has opened up a completely fresh debate about the future status of the Gibraltar Regiment, which I trust that the House will not embark on today, I shall withdraw the motion.

I ask my hon. Friend to proceed with caution down the path that he has embarked upon and to engage in the widest possible consultation—not only in Gibraltar, but in this country—about the possible changed status of the Gibraltar Regiment. I do not think that such changes

should be embarked upon without full consultation and without taking into account the views of the people of Gibraltar.

I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion and clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New clause 1

SEXUAL CONDUCT TO PREJUDICE OF GOOD ORDER AND DISCIPLINE

'.—(1) After section 69 of each of the 1955 Acts and after section 39 of the 1957 Act there shall be inserted the following section—

"Sexual conduct to prejudice of good order and discipline

. (1) Sexual conduct, whether heterosexual or homosexual, shall not constitute an offence under any provision of this Act unless that conduct—

(a) is prejudicial, or may be prejudicial, to good order and discipline; or

(b) undermines, or tends to undermine, command relationships; or

(c) involves the use of rank or position to obtain sexual favours or to coerce or encourage another person or persons to take part in sexual activity; or

(d) constitutes a civil offence.

(2) No person who is subject to military law shall be subject to any investigation, disciplinary proceedings or discharge solely on the ground of his or her sexual orientation, whether that person has a heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual or lesbian orientation.".

(2) The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 is amended as follows—

(a) In section 146 (extension of Sexual Offences Act 1967 to the armed forces and merchant navy) subsection (4) is repealed; and

(b) In section 147 (homosexuality on merchant ships and in the armed forces: Northern Ireland) subsection (3) is repealed.'.

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(b) In section 147 (homosexuality on merchant ships and in the armed forces: Northern Ireland) subsection (3) is repealed.'.—*[Mrs. Currie.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mrs. Edwina Currie (South Derbyshire): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

A few moments ago, the House was expressing its concern about dead soldiers. Now it is time to express our concern about the welfare of living soldiers, men and women who are serving in the armed forces right now. New clause 1 has two main elements. Part of the new clause spells out a proposed new code of conduct. It would apply to all inappropriate sexual behaviour, whether heterosexual or homosexual. It would protect women as well as men. It would protect young people, and it would protect those in junior ranks who might be at risk of sexual harassment. It would make it clear to heterosexuals as well as to lesbians and to gay men that no inappropriate behaviour would be tolerated.

The other part of the proposed new clause provides that the armed forces shall not discriminate on the ground of sexual orientation. The supporters of the new clause want to make it absolutely clear that we disapprove profoundly of irresponsible behaviour—by whomever, and whatever their sexual orientation might be. We would prefer to see each case dealt with on its merits or demerits, on the details of the case as presented.

The ban against homosexuals is the only blanket ban that the armed forces currently operate. Heterosexual misconduct, drug taking, alcoholism, bullying and even serious criminal convictions in the civil courts are treated as discretionary disciplinary matters. It is our view, therefore, that the blanket ban is based on prejudice, pure and simple, and as such it is offensive, impractical and expensive.

7.15 pm

All discrimination is inefficient—which is one reason why I, as a Conservative, object to it. But this discrimination, in particular, costs the taxpayer a great deal of money. It has been worked out that each investigation takes approximately 30 working days, and longer in the case of officers. The costs of basic training, including salary and administration, have been estimated at £30,000, and training costs for officers who are dismissed are substantially higher. Specialised training costs are, of course, much higher. Recently, for example, four Nimrod pilots and navigators were discharged, and the cost of replacing them must be absolutely astronomical. Hundreds of trained men and women are discharged, yet we are told that the MOD is short of money.

What type of people are being discharged under the ban? They are hardly ruffians or criminals. They are, in fact, the type of serving men and women we should be very proud to have in our armed forces. Let us consider the cases of several people who are currently taking the MOD to the European Court of Human Rights.

Lieutenant Commander Duncan Lustig-Prean enlisted in 1983 and was discharged in 1994. The officer's report on him, from Commander Mussey, of 31 December 1993 stated that he was

"A most able, conscientious and industrious officer. His engaging and warm personality allows him to communicate effectively at all levels . . . Resourceful, versatile and perceptive, he is a most effective manager and organiser . . . his magnanimous and conciliatory nature fosters genuine trust and support . . . has great all round potential. He is an outstanding prospect for early promotion to Commander."

The word "trust" features in that.

Jeanette Smith, a senior aircraftwoman and nurse, is from Derbyshire. She enlisted in 1989 and was discharged in 1994. Her discharge report said:

[Mrs. Edwina Currie]

"SAC Smith has an above average understanding of trade knowledge . . . There is no evidence to suggest misconduct, corruption, blatant or promiscuous activities or unnatural behaviour on service establishments",

yet that qualified nurse was dismissed.

John Beckett, from the Royal Navy, was a weapons engineer mechanic serving on HMS Collingwood. He enlisted for 22 years in 1989 and was discharged in September 1993. Sir Michael Layard, Second Sea Lord, Chief of Naval Personnel, said of him:

"We accept that he was a loyal and patriotic man and that he has not committed a civilian or naval disciplinary offence."

Sergeant Graeme Grady, of the Royal Air Force, enlisted in 1980 and was discharged in 1984. His squadron leader, Squadron Leader McDevitt, stated:

"Sergeant Grady . . . has been a loyal serviceman and a conscientious and hardworking tradesman who could be relied on to achieve the highest standards. He has displayed sound personal qualities and integrity throughout his service and has enjoyed the respect of superiors, peers and subordinates alike."

He was

"recommended to any future employer",

but not to the armed services.

Other countries regard this type of ban as completely unnecessary and find it perfectly feasible to employ gays and lesbians. Among the NATO countries that have no ban are Canada; France, which has not had a ban for more than 200 years; Norway; Denmark; the Netherlands, which has had no ban for more than 20 years; Belgium; Spain; and Germany, which has no such ban on conscripts. Israel removed the ban in 1982. The Australians have a strict code on sexual behaviour, which is what I am proposing, but it has no ban. The Swiss have no such ban, nor has New Zealand. On this issue, we stand shoulder to shoulder with Turkey.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): Is the hon. Lady aware that, today, I had a conversation with an Israeli reserve service man who told me that, not only is there no ban on gay or lesbian people in the Israeli army, but that a known Israeli homosexual was promoted as an officer? He has died, and the Israeli army is now considering whether it should award a pension to his male partner.

Mrs. Currie: The point is also well made that, whether with other NATO or United Nations personnel, there is absolutely no doubt that British troops have now served alongside gay service members from many other countries in many theatres of war without any problems arising. We also do not regard it as a matter of concern in other parts of the civilian services. There is no such ban in the police, and there is no such ban in the fire service.

If I am to be told—as no doubt I will be by my hon. Friend the Minister—that it is a matter of people being in close proximity to each other, I should remind him that we removed the ban for merchant seamen, and that we also removed the ban on gays serving in the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. There have been no ill consequences of that. In fact, I think that it is probably now true to say that it is not only nice girls who love a sailor.

Mr. Brazier: My hon. Friend has not said how she feels about the overwhelming majority of serving personnel who do not want to have homosexuals in the military. *[Interruption.]* The German professional forces are the only major organisation in the European countries that she mentioned that has to recruit people rather than having conscripts, and they have the same ban as we do.

Mrs. Currie: I was going to come to that. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising it.

It seems to me that the reaction of the Ministry of Defence has been rather curious. As part of its approach, it commissioned a survey, a copy of which is in the Library. It seems bizarre that the MOD should commission a survey among soldiers. Its results were predictable. One might, indeed, have stuck the notice up on the mess board saying, "No gays wanted here", which is a paraphrase of what my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) has just said.

I venture to suggest that a similar outcome might have occurred if, for example, we had asked the Guards whether they wanted blacks serving with them. I believe that my hon. Friend the Minister was a sub-lieutenant for three years in the 11th Hussars. Given the amount of wise-cracking that he has been indulging in this evening, perhaps one should dub him the gay Hussar, but there we are.

The Ministry of Defence did not ask soldiers whether women should serve in the armed forces as equals. I believe that if it had done so, it would have received much the same sort of response. But we did not invite the views of serving service men and women on whether females should be allowed to serve as equals. We told them that women would make good truck drivers, navigation officers and pay clerks. We tackled the issues of discipline and good order—more or less successfully, I believe.

The point is that we did not pander to prejudice on that issue. We did not encourage the enunciation of prejudice. We ensured that the armed forces obeyed the new rules and adapted to changed circumstances. We did so because we felt that the armed forces had no choice. But on gays, the Ministry of Defence has a choice. How much more impressive it would be if that choice were exercised with tolerance and dignity.

We have made some progress. Until a couple of years ago, the very fact of being a homosexual was a criminal offence in the armed forces. Yet the improvement is slight. What bothers me is the continued harassment and hounding of officers and ranks. It is official hounding and it appears to be encouraged the moment sexual orientation becomes suspect. In December 1995—a matter of only a few weeks ago—a former Royal Marine was approached in a gay pub in Torquay by a man who later invited him home. Upon leaving the bar, the man produced a Royal Marine military police warrant card and tried to arrest the person. He obviously did not know that the chap had left the Royal Marines some three years earlier, so no action could be taken.

Between September and November 1995, near Aldershot, a member of Rank Outsiders—the campaigning organisation—working on a gay men's health project observed frequent visits to a known cruising area by two men whom he knew were members of the Army special investigation branch. He knew that because they had conducted his investigation some time previously. During the visits he observed the SIB men making approaches to men who were of service appearance and attempting to pick them up.

So we have official agents provocateurs in the armed forces. Not only that, but we are spending quite a lot of money on surveillance. Portsmouth Royal Naval SIB put up a camera observation point in a building opposite Drummonds public house, a known gay bar. Former Able Seaman Brett Burnell was investigated after being photographed entering the pub by the SIB. He was shown the photos and has been discharged.

In 1995, four RAF officers who had been anonymously informed on were subjected to an intensive six-week operation by 12 members of the RAF SIB. The Ministry of Defence is supposed to be short of money, yet it had 12 senior officers of the RAF SIB spend six weeks watching four RAF officers. The evidence clearly shows that they were routinely followed throughout that period. They were informed by their commanding officers on discharge that the evidence from that operation was the justification for discharge.

I have always disapproved of civilian police spending their time taking pictures of public toilets, trying to catch the poor souls who get involved cottaging, because I think that the police ought to be catching real criminals. I take exactly the same view of the military special investigation branches. Surely they have some real cases that they ought to be chasing, and should not be chasing the people whom I have just described.

I have very little to add, except that in the 1990s homosexual men and women have seen attitudes to them change. Attitudes have become more liberal and less harsh in many fields. Homosexuals have been enabled to live with less fear and instead to play their part as ordinary tax-paying citizens, minding their own business like everyone else—but not yet in the armed forces. That is to their disadvantage, the forces' detriment and our country's shame.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: I and my colleagues will have a free vote on this issue, but as the spokesman for my party on defence issues, I have signed new clause 1 and I have made a strong recommendation to my right hon. and hon. Friends that they should vote for it.

The issue was considered by the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill. I hope that I will not be thought to do an injustice to the Committee if I say that there is nothing very new in its analysis, as reported in its proceedings. Perhaps that is inevitable, because the ground that we are considering is well traversed. The only correct way to approach such an issue is on the basis of principle. I believe firmly as a matter of principle that there should be no discrimination against any person by virtue of race, colour or sexual orientation. In my judgment the issue is firmly rooted in the civil rights of every United Kingdom citizen.

Before we deny any citizen his or her civil rights, there must be overwhelming evidence to justify such a course of action. We deny the civil rights of terrorists because their conduct goes to the very existence of the state. Only in those extreme circumstances is it justified to detract from the civil rights of any individual. It is my judgment that that standard of evidence has not been shown in the circumstances that we are here considering.

The hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs. Currie) moved the new clause with great skill and sincerity. She has been notable for her courage in adopting the matter in circumstances which have not always made her entirely persona grata within her party. She mentioned the position in other armed forces. The Defence Select Committee has just returned from a three-day visit to Bosnia. We visited several units which are deployed there under the allied rapid reaction corps, of which the United Kingdom has overall command. Virtually all the countries that the hon. Lady mentioned are represented in that NATO deployment.

I did not hear a single British soldier say to me that the Dutch were less effective than the British because they had a different policy on homosexuality in the armed services. I did not hear it suggested that the contribution made by those who had gone to Bosnia from other NATO countries was diminished because those countries had a different policy from that of the United Kingdom.

The hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) referred in an intervention to the attitude within our services. It is almost inevitably conditioned by the fact that the ban exists. The views of people in the services are conditioned by the ban.

If one feature of the ban should surely be offensive to all of us, it is the means of enforcing it. The hon. Member for South Derbyshire gave us some eloquent examples. Let us consider the nature of the investigations. They are degrading for those who are the subject of them and, I suspect, pretty degrading for those who have to carry them out. That type of investigation, and the use of agents provocateurs, would be outlawed in a civilian court. It would not be feasible to admit evidence obtained in that way. That is a feature of the matter that ought to be offensive to everyone in the House.

As the hon. Lady said, new clause 1 sets out the principle of no discrimination, but it also sets out other principles in plain language perhaps for the first time in legislation on service discipline. What are those other principles? Sexual conduct of any kind that prejudices good order and discipline is unacceptable and is an offence, as is sexual conduct of any kind which undermines the command relationship and the use of rank or position to obtain sexual favours. Those principles stand robustly behind the principle of non-discrimination at the centre of the new clause.

It would be much better for us to make a measured, sensible decision to change the policy rather than to be forced into it by the inevitable and ultimate judgment of the European Court of Human Rights.

7.30 pm

Mr. Michael Brown (Brigg and Cleethorpes): I shall follow the speeches of my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs. Currie) and the hon. and learned Member for Fife, North–East (Mr. Campbell) by focusing on the last sentence of the hon. and learned Gentleman's speech.

First, I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for the fairness and courtesy with which he has received my representations on behalf of Rank Outsiders during the past year. However, I believe that he will invite the House to reject the new clause by praying in aid the following recommendation by the Select Committee:

"We do not recommend any change in the current policy."

That recommendation was based primarily on the report that was commissioned by the MOD last year and that found that the armed forces did not want openly gay people to serve in the forces.

[Mr. Michael Brown]

As the hon. Member for Newham, North–West (Mr. Banks) said from a sedentary position in answer to the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) in the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire, had we adopted that attitude some 20 or 30 years ago in regard to black people and invited all the ranks to express a view on whether they wanted to shower with black people, the answer would have been exactly the same.

Prejudice is prejudice, whether it is racial or sexual, and prejudice is wrong. It must be outlawed. My hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire and I do not always see eye to eye on matters relating to Europe. Today is Europe day, so it is an appropriate time for my hon. Friend to have introduced her new clause.

I want the House of Commons always to be the place where discrimination and prejudice are outlawed, but I should also refer to a point that was mentioned by the hon. and learned Member for Fife, North–East. Earlier this year, when four former members of the armed forces took their cases to the Court of Appeal, the Master of the Rolls said that it was likely that the blanket ban would be held to be in breach of article 8 of the European Convention. It is also possible that the European equal treatment directive will apply if those four ex-service men and women are successful in either of the relevant European institutions.

I want the House to imagine we are debating the same issue in 1998 or 1999. I am sure that the Conservative party will be embarking on an historic fifth term. Perhaps my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will have decided that, after nearly a decade as Prime Minister, it is time to become the Earl of Huntingdon. Perhaps, with the unanimous support of all my right hon. and hon. Friends, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence, who I regret is unable to be here today, will have become Prime Minister. Perhaps he will ask himself, "Who made such an excellent job of my dirty work during the debate in May 1996?", and promote my hon. Friend the Minister of State for the Armed Forces to the post of Secretary of State for Defence.

My fear is that in 1998 or 1999, whoever is Prime Minister, and whoever is Secretary of State, the Government—a Conservative Government or a Labour Government—will have a ruling against them from the European Court of Human Rights.

I remember the hapless late Lord Joseph coming to the House in 1985 to introduce legislation to outlaw corporal punishment in our schools. It was not a pretty sight. Most of my hon. Friends were thoroughly annoyed and angry by the introduction of such a measure. My late noble Friend said that he was very sorry and that he did not particularly want to introduce such legislation, but that he was required to do so because of a ruling against the United Kingdom by the European Court of Human Rights.

As I said earlier, I believe that the House of Commons should be the place to which those who suffer injustice and prejudice should come, but although I am a Euro-sceptic, I cannot blame those who cannot obtain justice from the House for exercising their right to go to the European Court and using the European convention.

I believe that one day—probably only two or three years hence—my hon. Friend the Minister or an Opposition Member in his post will be required to introduce legislation and there will not be a free vote. If we are still in power and my hon. Friend has been promoted to Secretary of State, he will be required to stand at the Dispatch Box and present a Bill. All my hon. Friends whose views differ from mine will be very angry that they will not have a free vote, as they were in 1985 when the late Lord Joseph was required to introduce the measure to which I referred.

It is inevitable that this ban will be outlawed—if not by the House of Commons, certainly by the European Court and probably by the European Court of Human Rights—and a Minister of the Crown will have to come to the House under duress to overturn it. I do not like to see Ministers under duress from outside organisations. I want them to right injustices because those injustices are patently wrong.

We understand that 300 to 400 service men and women have been discharged from the forces during the past three or four years. How many hundreds of service men and women who the special investigations branch have not yet found or have not yet been grassed up are quietly going about their daily business serving their country? They fought in the Gulf war and they serve all over the world, risking their lives for our country. Tonight there are gay people in the armed forces who have not yet been grassed up by the special investigations branch. If he cannot do so tonight, I believe that one day my hon. Friend the Minister will have to do something about this gross injustice. Nevertheless, I pay tribute to him for the manner in which he has always received the delegations that I have led on behalf of Rank Outsiders.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Kingston upon Hull, North): I shall not detain the House for long. It is more than a decade since, on behalf of the Labour party, I proposed the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the armed forces. I am only sorry we do not have a more powerful Whip on that today.

The reason why I reached that conclusion and recommended that course of action to my right hon. and hon. Friends was twofold. First, it was basically wrong that two individuals could be engaged in a sexual act that would be completely legal for one person, but for another it would be a disciplinary fault for which he would be dismissed from the armed forces. That seemed basically wrong in practice and in principle.

Secondly, I remembered the background to the Calcutt inquiry and its overtones of homosexuality, heterosexuality and blackmail. There could be nothing worse than for members of the armed forces to risk their careers, and perhaps through fear of blackmail, put their country at risk for doing something which, under proper circumstances, was accepted in civilian life. It seems wrong to put our service people in that position.

At the time, during the cold war, the pressures to which members of the armed forces—in that case it was in Cyprus, but also elsewhere—were subjected because of their sexual orientation and particular way of displaying it seemed very wrong. Those two reasons seemed compelling then, and they remain compelling. I urge my hon. Friends to consider the incongruity of the fact that one person can be disciplined and lose his job for engaging in an activity with another person for whom it is perfectly legal, and the dangers and pressures under which members of our armed forces could be put.

Mr. Wilkinson: This is probably the most important debate on the Bill. We must not be in any sense

censorious—that is the last thing we want—but must seriously consider the evidence. Five years ago, I had the great privilege of chairing a Special Standing Committee on an armed forces Bill. It is an enormous merit of that procedure that hon. Members can take evidence from interested parties. On this occasion, the Committee reached in essence exactly the same conclusion that we did five years ago, when we recommended decriminalisation of homosexual behaviour in the armed forces—which the Government implemented.

We recommended also that homosexual behaviour was not compatible with remaining in the armed forces, because members of them did not want any change. After all, they are the best judges of the appropriate values for the organisations in which they serve. Those values may not seem to us identical to those that we normally share, but the profession of arms is a calling distinct from civilian life. Although those values may appear a bit traditional, for those who serve in the armed forces they are greatly appreciated. They are appreciated also by parents who are perhaps encouraging their children's aspiration to enter the armed services. If parents felt that the forces condoned homosexuality, a large number of them would do their best to resist the recruitment of their children.

Mrs. Currie: That is prejudice.

Mr. Wilkinson: My hon. Friend may say that, but I speak of the sort of family values that are held by most people in this country—and which the armed forces are called upon to defend, if necessary, with their lives. We ought to be chary before seeking to impose on the armed forces values that they do not want.

Mrs. Currie: It does not look as though my two daughters plan to enter the armed forces, but if they were to do so, I would be obliged to warn them that they were more likely to be killed or seriously injured than be the subject of homosexual attack.

Mr. Wilkinson: As my hon. Friend admitted, that is a purely hypothetical situation in respect of her children. I will not make my argument so subjective but will specifically address my hon. Friend's proposed new clause. Subsection (1) states:

"Sexual conduct, whether heterosexual or homosexual, shall not constitute an offence under any provision of this Act unless that conduct—

(a) is prejudicial, or may be prejudicial, to good order and discipline".

Members of the armed forces believe that homosexuality—because of its nature, the intensity of the emotions involved, and the risk of blackmail and of undue influence—is prejudicial to good order and discipline, particularly in the close confines required of service in the field, remote stations or on ships at sea.

Subsection (1)(b) of new clause 1 states that homosexuality shall not be an offence unless it

"undermines, or tends to undermine, command relationships".

Again, that is true where there is favouritism—particularly of a sexual kind. That form of bonding can impair the necessary discipline and mutuality of respect inherent in the command relationship.

Subsection (1)(c) provides for an offence where the conduct

"involves the use of rank or position to obtain sexual favours".

The armed forces have gradations of rank that may seem strange to my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs. Currie), but they are a necessary function of the command system. Almost inevitably with differences in age, there will be differences of rank. As there are bound to be such differences, there are also bound to be problems if homosexuality in the armed forces is condoned.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): Has the hon. Gentleman never heard of a man in a senior position using his seniority to make unwanted sexual advances to a woman of junior rank, in civilian or Army life? The logic of the hon. Gentleman's argument is that there should be no women in the armed forces either.

7.45 pm

Mr. Wilkinson: I shall not follow the hon. Lady's intervention. Suffice it to say that differences of responsibility of rank accentuate the potential mutuality of attraction or the influence that one person may have over another. A homosexual dimension is a complication that the armed services can do without.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Wilkinson: I want to draw my remarks to a conclusion.

Many speakers in the debate cited the practices of the armed services of other countries. They are welcome to run their armed forces as they run their other institutions—according to traditions, values, history and patterns of behaviour that appear to them to be right and normal. The British armed services are essentially Regular forces because, except in times of emergency or war, we do not usually go in for conscription. We are selective and have particular standards and values, which do not include condoning homosexual behaviour. It may be that the matter will eventually go to the European Court of Justice and that the equal opportunities directive may be invoked, to seek to impose on the United Kingdom's armed forces a pattern of values with which the majority of service men are not happy.

My hon. Friend the Minister may recall an Adjournment debate in which I moved against the Ministry of Defence decision to grant compensation retrospectively to ex-service women required to leave the armed forces on the ground of pregnancy and thereby retrospectively gain huge sums in compensation. The MOD's decision to cede the principle has already cost the British taxpayer more than £50 million.

Mr. Stephen Day (Cheadle): Disgraceful.

Mr. Wilkinson: Just as my hon. Friend says.

It is also wrong for the European Court of Justice to arrogate unto itself an intrusive right, because, under the treaty of union signed in Maastricht, defence remains a national responsibility—so manpower policies within the armed forces, including disciplinary provisions, should

[Mr. Wilkinson]

rest with member states. I hope that—in the unfortunate eventuality the ECJ is called on to adjudicate—the Government will resist—

Mr. Michael Brown: My hon. Friend means the European Court of Human Rights.

Mr. Wilkinson: I am talking about a decision based on the equal opportunities directive. I am not talking about a potential decision of European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, because we are a signatory to the convention, so I am excluding that court from my arguments. I am specifically addressing my arguments to the ECJ. If there were an adverse decision by the ECJ, I hope that the Government would refuse it because otherwise we would open a floodgate to retrospective compensation claims at great cost to the British taxpayer.

The majority of the British armed forces do not want any change in our rules on homosexuality; the Government have been entirely right to support that majority and to accept the advice of the Select Committee on the matter.

Mr. Kaufman: As the hon. Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) perhaps knows, I have considerable personal respect for him, but the speech that he made just now is the kind of speech, on subjects related to decent and sensible reform, that the House has heard for centuries. It is the kind of speech that is made when something that makes sense is being proposed by those who are trying to prevent what is inevitably going to happen. I shall refer to such matters a little more before I sit down.

Two points emerge so far from the debate, following the admirable speech by the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs. Currie). The first is the implication that, because a Select Committee of the House has made a report, the Government are bound by it. I only wish that was so in the case of the Select Committee on National Heritage, because, if so, the Government's confusions about listed sporting events and about Channel Four funding would have been eliminated at source.

The second question that arises in my mind—following the speech by the hon. Member for Ruislip–Northwood, the report of the Select Committee and much of the comment about the issue—is what, is it about members of the United Kingdom armed forces that makes them so vulnerable to seduction by homosexuals? What is it about them? Are they so fastidious, and are they so vulnerable in a way that service men in the rest of Europe, in other countries and in the state of Israel are not? Are we recruiting weaklings into our armed forces? That is the implication of the terrible danger that appears to be hanging over them, as advanced in the speech of the hon. Member for Ruislip–Northwood.

The hon. Gentleman said that homosexuality is not compatible with membership of Her Majesty's forces. That is very strange to me, because I have a slight suspicion that there are large numbers of homosexuals in our armed forces today. I have a further suspicion that there have been homosexuals throughout history in our own armed forces and those of other great powers, and, somehow or other, we have managed to win wars all the same.

Is the implication that the official acceptance of homosexuality would bring discredit on our armed forces? If so, we should have proof that that has taken place. If I consider other cases in the armed forces, I see that a convicted murderer, Paratrooper Lee Clegg, has not only been retained in the armed forces after his release from prison, but has been promoted to lance-corporal and made second in command of an eight-man rifle section. It seems to be all right to promote a convicted murderer in our armed forces, but it would appear that people of a particular sexual orientation are more dangerous to the good name of our armed forces.

Three men, who have now been discharged from our armed forces, killed a woman, Louise Jensen, in Cyprus in the most brutal and appalling way. I do not gain any impression from reading press reports of that case that those were gay men who were driven to murder that woman so brutally, yet they have inflicted more discredit on our armed forces than anyone else I can remember in recent years—so much so that the Secretary of State for Defence has had to make a public apology for what took place.

Last night, I was reading "Roads to Ruin: The Shocking History of Social Reform" by E. S. Turner. He has looked at rearguard actions against sensible and decent reform over the centuries. What emerges from that great book is that the kind of untenable, illogical and prejudiced arguments that have been advanced against new clause 1, which I have signed, were advanced about all other kinds of social reform on which we would regard it as ludicrous that they should even have been debated.

Those reforms included stopping children and women going down coal mines; it was described as ridiculous to say that that was not a satisfactory or admirable state of affairs. The Plimsoll line has saved the lives of many seafarers, but it was said in the House that it was ludicrous that that elementary reform should be introduced.

A number of us have been in the House for many years and the kind of arguments that have been advanced by the hon. Member for Ruislip–Northwood, and will no doubt be advanced by other Conservative Members tonight, are analogous to the very arguments that have been put in the House for generations, and that led to innocent men being hanged for murder. It has even been argued that we should take that risk.

We take a good deal of sanctimonious satisfaction from the role of the House of Commons. We are all proud—as I am—to be Members of the House of Commons, but we seem to imagine that the House has been a force for forward and inevitable reform over centuries and generations. The fact has to be faced that this is a House of belated reform, and a House that often does not get around to obvious, necessary and logical reforms.

It has to be said that the House has allowed a terrible amount of human suffering to take place because it has been so slow to accept logical and sensible arguments for reform. There is a great list of examples for anybody who studies *Hansard* over the decades, generations and centuries. This debate will eventually take its place in the annals of those debates, in which the House has shown itself reluctant to do the right, sensible and decent thing.

It may well be that new clause 1 will be defeated tonight, but the hon. Member for South Derbyshire is far too tough a campaigner to believe that that will be the end of the story. She will win, and all those who agree with

her will win, but before she does, and before we do, we will have to go through some more years of hypocrisy and persecution. It is about time that the House did the right thing at the right time. Tonight is the right time.

Mr. Key: After more than decade of representing many thousands of service men and women in all three services, I have come to the conclusion that it would be right to support the status quo tonight. I have given that pledge to my military constituents and their families, and to all my constituents.

The argument stems from the military ethos, which filters down through the whole chain of command, and says straightforwardly that the military are different. Historically, it has been different for a very long time, and certainly since the county regiments were established. That is a fact. To understand it and the implications that flow from it, one either has to have served in the armed forces, which I have not, or to have undertaken the sort of investigation carried out by the Select Committee of which I have had the honour to be a member for the past four months.

We, the members of the Committee, talked to service men and women on and off duty in England, Northern Ireland and Germany. Initially, I thought that it was a put-up job. I thought that all the people lined up for us to speak to must have been hand-picked and told what to say. As the week went by, we met scores of people who continued to say the same thing.

I came to realise that, in the British armed forces, there is a deep and genuine conviction that homosexuals have no place in service life. Other people may not like that attitude, but it is a plain fact. The courts may not like it, and they may seek to change it. My greatest fear is that change may be forced on the services too fast, with all the attendant risks of recrimination, victimisation and real unrest. We should not add to those risks by agreeing to the new clause.

Change will come slowly when it comes. It will need a massive change of culture, and a massive re-education programme in the armed forces.

8 pm

Service men and women are not unreasonable people. I found it ironical that, while they were horrified at the thought of homosexuals in the forces, they accepted homosexuals in the rest of the community in civilian life. One service man told me that his brother was a homosexual, and that he had told him not to join the Army.

Recently, I was in Bosnia with the hon. and learned Member for Fife, North-East (Mr. Campbell). We visited forces from the United States, Canada and Holland. Like the hon. and learned Gentleman, I took the opportunity of asking about homosexuality in those forces. Only in the Dutch contingent did I find genuine acceptance of homosexuals.

In none of those forces did the nationals concerned believe that there was any threat to discipline, to undermining of command relationships or to operational effectiveness on the battlefield because of the presence of homosexuals. There was no suggestion in the British forces that in NATO British troops would not accept orders from those who might be homosexuals in other forces, or would refuse to serve alongside them.

I have much sympathy for the terms of the new clause. We shall return to the issue, but tonight is not the time to press it. The General Medical Council has been quoted, and I am disappointed that we have not heard from it. I fully understand that service doctors are part of the chain of command. The Standing Committee was told of harrowing events, such as the homosexual sailor who set off on a tour of duty of some months and realised after a few weeks that he had a genital problem. He realised that the ship's medical officer would be bound to take action leading to his discharge from the service. The sailor waited for four months before going to his family general practitioner at home. That is unacceptable and dangerous. It is dangerous to the sailor and to his colleagues. That is something that must be addressed.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): Would not the answer be to agree to the new clause? It seems that the burden of the hon. Gentleman's argument, and that of the hon. Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson), is that homosexuals are much more likely than heterosexuals to behave in an improper fashion sexually, or in a more coercive fashion. What evidence is there that that is so? If there is none, as I believe, surely the logic is that those who oppose the new clause are prejudiced. We should oppose their prejudiced views.

Mr. Key: The answer is that there is no such evidence. If the hon. Lady will hear me out, she will understand why I take that point.

I talked about chaplains when the Bill was being considered in Standing Committee. There was a flurry in the national press, and then a rather tragic flow of correspondence in the *Church Times*. I had written to the Bishop of Her Majesty's forces asking for clarification from Bishop John Kirkham, the Bishop of Sherborne. The bishop replied on 1 May. His letter was duly published in the *Church Times*. The letter is important, because so many people were concerned that they could not trust chaplains.

The bishop wrote:

"The position is quite clear and is fully endorsed by the Chaplain of the Fleet, the Chaplain General and the Chaplain-in-chief (RAF). Chaplains in HM Forces are commissioned as chaplains and their status as officers in no way prejudices their absolute duty of confidentiality on all matters as priests and ministers of their respective Churches. This position is recognised by the authorities in the three Services. If individual chaplains have failed in their duty of confidentiality, for whatever reason, that is a matter of extreme regret and they have contravened their duty as chaplains."

Whatever the courts may say, it is unacceptable and uncivilised for the forces of the Crown to recognise on the one hand that homosexuality in the armed forces is not a criminal offence, and then to make use of agents provocateurs or covert surveillance to expose homosexuals. The Select Committee was told that the Ministry of Defence has never discharged homosexuals for criminal offences; just being a homosexual is enough.

As a former military chaplain told the *Church Times* recently, those who have been offended by the practice of "outing" prominent people should remember that the Ministry of Defence has been doing it to its personnel for years. That is not something of which anyone can be proud.

Whatever the Committee decides this evening, we shall return to this issue.

Mr. Alan Howarth (Stratford–on–Avon): It is not fitting to condone prejudice and injustice in the armed

[Mr. Alan Howarth]

forces any more than it is elsewhere in society. It is clearly prejudice that we are discussing. Some of the world's greatest and most famous soldiers have been homosexual. There is surely no Member of this place who would seriously seek to deny that, for many centuries, homosexuals have served in the British armed forces with distinction. With great courage, skill and patriotism, they have contributed to the service of their country. It is plainly an injustice that men or women, on account of their sexuality, should be denied the opportunity to serve their country in the armed services.

It would have been right for the Government to give the lead in seeking to undo the culture of prejudice within the armed services by banning discrimination on the ground of sexuality. Sadly, the Government have not chosen to do so. The new clause is plainly sensible and decent, and the Government should not hesitate to accept it.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Mid–Kent): The points that I want to make have been succinctly set out in a letter that I wrote to the Select Committee on Defence. I shall repeat only one of them. What sticks in my craw, as much as anything, is the thought that, if a man has served in the armed service for perhaps 10 years—he may well have been decorated and subjected to the most extraordinary perils—and if by some mischance he has an accident and as a result of consequent medical examination is discovered to be a homosexual, even though he may have lived 180 miles away from the base and there has never been a flicker of a suggestion of improper, indecent or offensive behaviour, and he has been a model of discipline, he will lose his job. His livelihood and everything else will be lost. All he has done for the nation will be thrown away by sheer mischance and the prejudice that exists within the armed services.

It is not fair, it is entirely improper, and it flies in the face of the causes for which the armed services claim to stand.

Mr. Tony Banks: First, I congratulate the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs. Currie) on tabling the new clause. I also congratulate those who support her. The proposal has my support.

We have just heard a classic example of the theory of unsound time. Indeed, it has been put to us on two occasions, and both have involved the hon. Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson). First, we were discussing the possibility of forgiveness and a pardon for so-called cowardice during the first world war. The hon. Gentleman showed no compassion. In effect, he said that it was too late. We have been told by the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) that it is too early to agree to the new clause. It is too late on one hand and too early on the other. It is never too late and it is never too early to do something that is proper. My right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) has made that clear.

The House will have to come round to the matter. It will have to be decided. The barrenness of the arguments from those who oppose the new clause shows that up. Those who oppose it are scraping the barrel. They start by paying fulsome tribute to those homosexuals whom they know have served the country and continue to serve the country. But still they say that they will, in effect, be condemned for their sexual orientation.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton gave us the example of the three sub-human heterosexuals in Cyprus. Is it so wonderful to be heterosexual in those circumstances? They are the sort of people who bring shame to our armed forces, not those homosexual men who loyally serve their country and are ready to die for it, yet are still treated abysmally by the House and the Government.

On the amendment moved by hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay), the House revealed itself as having no compassion in terms of its majority. Now it appears to be revealing itself as homophobic as well. It is appalling to see the House of Commons behave in that way.

We have heard about the survey of the armed forces and told that somehow we must accept its results as sufficient evidence for the rejection of the new clause. I should like to know far more about that survey, although there is not time to go into the matter tonight.

I understand that no anonymity was given to those who were questioned. Who will come forward and say that they think that gays should be allowed to serve in the armed forces? Even if a person who did so was heterosexual, one could imagine what would be said to him afterwards. The finger of suspicion would be pointed at such people, whatever their sexual orientation. How can we possibly accept that the survey is socially just or statistically admissible?

It is no good saying that we will allow prejudice to determine policy. That is precisely what this is all about—not wanting homosexuals in the Army. I am sure that, if the same people were asked, they would say that they did not want blacks or even women in the Army. Shall we allow racists and sexists to determine national policy in Britain? That is not what we should be doing. We should not abrogate our power and responsibility to the British people, because those who are prejudiced say that they do not want any change in the way in which we organise the armed forces. We cannot accept that survey as acceptable on any terms.

We decide, and we must determine. The new clause is in time now, and to postpone it further is only to bring further disgrace on the House and further to alienate those gay men and women who have loyally served, and will continue so to serve, Britain's armed forces.

Mr. Viggers: I wish only to assure the House of the care and the concern that the Select Committee put into considering this issue. Knowing that the Ministry of Defence had commissioned an enormous report on the subject, I encouraged institutions and bodies with a special interest in the subject to submit evidence to us, and we took evidence from those who had a special interest in the subject.

During the past five months, the Select Committee, on its visits and in receiving evidence here in the House of Commons, has asked scores, even hundreds, of service men and others what their attitude is to homosexuality in the armed forces. I think that it is right that we should take account of the overwhelming response that came back, which is that they wish the status quo to continue.

The Select Committee considered the issue very carefully, and I am confident that the conclusion we reached is correct.

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton): The ban on homosexuals and lesbians serving in the armed forces treats those people, and all homosexuals and lesbians in Britain, as second-class citizens. That should not be, and the ban should go.

There was no such discrimination in the second world war. According to statistics, at least 250,000 homosexuals served in the British forces during that war. One of those was a Mr. Dudley Cave, now aged 75. He was quoted in *The Guardian* yesterday, and I shall just read a little bit of the article:

"Cave recalls that neither the top brass nor fellow soldiers showed any concern about gay enlistees. 'There were none of the witch hunts that we have nowadays . . . Homosexual soldiers were more or less accepted. The visible gays were mostly drag performers in concert teams. Regarded with considerable affection, their camp humour helped lift the men's spirits'."

Contrary to the current fears of the generals, during the war there was no evidence that homosexual soldiers undermined unit cohesion:

"'All the gays and straights worked together as a team. We had to because our lives might have depended on it'."

If that discrimination was unacceptable in wartime, it is unacceptable in peacetime as well, and I say that the ban should go.

Sex on duty or in the barracks is, of course, not acceptable. But that is the case with heterosexuals as well as homosexuals. However, what soldiers do in their private time should not be the subject of prurient investigation, disciplinary action and the sack. The ban is a gross breach of the civil liberties of those individuals, and it is almost certain that the United Kingdom will be found to be in violation of the European convention on human rights. That is why I support the new clause tonight.

8.15 pm

Mr. Clive Betts (Sheffield, Attercliffe): I first say to the hon. Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson), who was concerned about the threat of blackmail if we passed the new clause, and the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) who was concerned about the threat of victimisation: what on earth do they think is happening in the armed forces today? There is blackmail and victimisation because people are frightened that they will lose their jobs and be discharged if their sexuality is discovered. That is the situation.

I want to refer to the case of one of my constituents, Mr. John Beckett, with whom I have had correspondence and a lengthy conversation on his situation, which is most concerning and should worry every hon. Member.

John Beckett is a young man who had an exemplary record, to which the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs. Currie) referred in an excellent speech in moving the new clause. He was to be considered as an officer candidate. He had an unblemished record both in civilian and military life. He had given more than five years of his young life to the armed services. He was trained and extremely committed. Not only had he committed himself and a number of years of his life to his vocation, but thousands of pounds of public money had been spent on his training.

John Beckett told me that, when he entered the armed services, he did not know that he was gay. He subsequently had a relationship in civilian life. He never had a relationship with anyone in the armed services, either someone with whom he was serving closely or in another part of the armed services. He had one civilian relationship.

As a result of that, he spoke to the services' padre. On his advice, he went to his senior officer to report the situation. He was an honest and open young man, who was concerned about the situation and went to talk about it. As a result of volunteering that information, he was subjected to a most humiliating interview. I hope that it was as humiliating to the person who conducted it as it was to John Beckett, going, as it did, into every possible aspect of his private and personal relationships. I am not sure what they have to do with defending Britain in a proper manner. He was subsequently discharged.

John Beckett is now studying at college and wants to enter the fire service. I asked him how he now felt about the armed services; what his attitude was towards them. He said, "If Parliament was to change its view, I simply want to have the chance to go back and continue to serve my country. That is what I have always wanted to do, and it is still the view that I hold."

The House should know that John Beckett has not committed any crime—he has simply offended against bigotry and prejudice, and those who hold those views. The Select Committee has collected many pages of evidence, but, however many pages it collects, it cannot prove that bigotry and prejudice are right.

If we fail to pass the new clause tonight, John Beckett will not stand guilty of any crime, but we in the House will stand guilty of failing to allow him and hundreds, perhaps thousands, of other young people the opportunity to serve Britain in the way that they have chosen simply because of their sexuality. I believe that to be wrong. I hope that the House passes the new clause.

Mr. Nigel Spearing (Newham, South): I was impelled to investigate this subject, and, in particular, to read the Select Committee report, by a constituency case that was drawn to my attention. Hon. Members who are not present now might well have examined the issue more closely if they too had encountered such cases.

I was rather shocked by the Select Committee's approach, and will remain so unless the Minister or anyone else can give reasons for it. I served in the Army, and—understandably, I think; the majority of Army personnel, both male and female, are heterosexual—if I had been asked the question, I would have responded, "Let the position remain as it is." That is a natural response. I therefore do not think that, basing its view on that evidence, the Select Committee was particularly convincing.

The question is—a question that many hon. Members have asked—who knows? My hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Howarth) gave examples of distinguished military personnel of the past. I thought of my comrades in the forces as people. One might have had ideas or suspicions, but that was as far as it went. It was what they did that counted, and I knew what they would do if we were in a tight corner. Fortunately, I never had that experience, but I could imagine it, and there is plenty of evidence that other qualities are what matter in such circumstances.

[Mr. Nigel Spearing]

So it is a case of "Who knows?"—unless, of course, agents provocateurs are involved. I hope that, if this excellent debate achieves nothing else, it will lead the Secretary of State—he is not present now, but his Minister is—to review the policy on agents provocateurs. I hope that he will make it clear that the Government accept the view of the bishops, of which the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) reminded us, and will at least consider—perhaps not immediately—introducing the confidentiality that I believe should exist between doctor and patient and between Member of Parliament and constituent. Let us hope that at least those matters will be considered, whether or not the new clause is accepted.

I think that the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) is under a misapprehension. When I was commissioned, we were given a number of lectures. I should say that I held the commission of his late Majesty George VI, so this was some time ago. We were lectured about codes of conduct for officers—I should like to think that those codes now extend to all ranks, but that is by the way—and particularly about heterosexual behaviour with people in the area or with other officers' wives.

That code was fairly clear. Surely, in the end, it is codes of conduct rather than the letter of the law that count. I suggest to the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood—who I believe was himself an officer in Her Majesty's forces—that what is important is the way in which our extremely wonderful instincts are used, and the degree of responsibility or irresponsibility with which they are used, irrespective of orientation.

I hope that the Minister will tell me what is wrong with the proposal for a code of conduct of the sort specified in new subsection (1). The subsection states that sexual conduct,

"whether heterosexual or homosexual"—

which really means sexual conduct of any description—

"shall not constitute an offence"

except in certain circumstances. It would even be possible to remove the words "heterosexual" and "homosexual" from the legislation.

I also want to know why that provision cannot stand on its own. I realise that new subsection (2), which deals with disciplinary proceedings or discharge, may have legal implications, but surely that is consequential on the code of conduct specified in new subsection (1).

Let me deal with another issue that has not been mentioned so far. Her Majesty's forces contain both men and women, and, owing to gender differences, in normal circumstances—for obvious reasons—there is always more pressure on women. If a woman whose orientation is not known, as a result of her actions, an admission by her or any other indication does not respond as others hope, her susceptibility to, for instance, blackmail is different from that of a man in an equivalent position. Certain cases, well known from the newspapers, have shown that to be true.

I hope that, whatever happens tonight, the Minister will bear some of those background issues in mind.

Mr. Tony Banks: He is not even listening.

Mr. Spearing: I hope that he will listen. I hope that administrative action will be reviewed as a result of the debate;, and I hope that the Minister will tell us why he cannot accept new subsection (1)—if not now, at a later stage—rewording it as he wishes, but concentrating on responsible use of these wonderful powers that we all have, rather than contravention of good order and military discipline.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): When the Minister replies, I hope that he will touch on the report of the homosexuality policy assessment team to which my hon. Friend the Member for Newham, North-West (Mr. Banks) alluded, and, in particular, the experience in Australia, where the ban was lifted in 1992—notwithstanding the objections of a number of members of the joint chiefs of staff in Australia, who expressed the view that relaxation of the rule would be unacceptable.

According to the report, in Australia, after the initial outcry, homosexuality has become a non-issue. Exercising a flawed logic, however, the report then sets out a conclusion that is at variance with that statement:

"Australia enjoys a multi ethnic, multi cultural society with a considerable willingness, in the metropolitan areas at least, to accept sexual behaviour which, in the UK, is still regarded with a considerable degree of suspicion."

Where has the Ministry of Defence been? It is based in London, for goodness' sake.

It is the conclusion of that report that has informed the Government's response to the new clause. It is time for Britain to fall in line with Australia, New Zealand and the other European countries, and it is time for the House to support new clause 1.

Dr. Reid: It goes without saying that the subject of homosexuality in the armed forces was the most sensitive subject, and certainly the most intractable, with which the Select Committee had to deal. It forced us to make a judgment, on balance, between a general principle and a specific duty, both of which are dear to the majority of hon. Members.

The general principle is that sexual orientation or preference, in itself, should not exclude a person from the opportunities that are available to others. Most hon. Members probably support that principle. The same applies to the specific duty—the burden of duty placed on hon. Members to ensure that those whom we may ask to risk, and possibly sacrifice, their lives in the defence of this country are given the maximum support in securing maximum operational effectiveness, and thus the minimum number of casualties. That judgment, on the relative priorities to be given to civil rights on one hand and military imperatives on the other is never easy, but it often has to be made in military life.

Our most precious freedom, freedom of speech, does not apply in the British military, nor does the right to engage in political or trade union activity—freedoms which are so valued by us and which we take for granted. Again, the right to resign and the right to privacy in the most intimate of social situations is severely curtailed. Occasionally, whole groups suffer the curtailment of such rights. Women are excluded from combat units, and legislation incorporating the rights of disabled persons specifically excludes the military. These are always difficult decisions, but the blanket nature of the ban on homosexuals and lesbians makes that judgment, for me anyway, even more anguished.

8.30 pm

There will be a free vote on this issue, so I can speak only for the Labour Members of the Committee. We approached the problem with three initial premises. The first was that it was no part of our task to make moral judgments on sexual orientation; nor are there grounds for questioning the professionalism, dedication, courage or patriotism of homosexuals, individually or as a group.

The second premise was that we were dealing with a practical decision which takes effect not in general, not in the abstract or in civilian life, but within real life in the British armed forces. Finally, we are dealing with today's armed forces. In Britain, however enlightening foreign or historical comparisons may be, there is no perfect blueprint that can be automatically transposed, although, God knows, sometimes we wish that there were.

On the basis of those premises, when we cut through the fog, the propaganda and the prejudice, three essential questions remain. First, would allowing homosexuals openly to join the armed forces tend to weaken operational effectiveness? Secondly, would it be possible in the imposed social intimacy of the armed forces to guarantee the right to privacy of the sexual preference of homosexuals and the right to privacy of heterosexuals? Thirdly, is there an obvious compromise that might satisfy both sides?

I shall deal first with the question of operational effectiveness. As we know, the army's purpose is to fight. Whatever additional tasks it is given and irrespective of what other armies are constructed for, the purpose of the British Army is to fight and to win. Humanitarian or civil tasks are in addition to that, not a substitute for it. The burden that Parliament places on the members of our armed forces is to fight and win, even if they have to sacrifice not only their liberty but their lives.

The fighting power of a force consists of three elements. There is the conceptual element of tactics, doctrine and strategy; the resources element, which means the physical resources that we provide; and morale.

In military life, morale fulfils a purpose that is different from its normal usage. In military terms, it is both more specific and more comprehensive. It includes not only matters such as belief in a just cause or pride in the regiment's traditions but also, and crucially, ordered relations within a unit, absolute trust in one's comrades and absolute confidence in one's leaders. Those are the qualities that motivate a soldier to fight, and fight better than his enemy. If they are diminished, so is the command structure, the cohesion and the operational effectiveness of the military unit.

Among the factors that are most likely to undermine that mutual confidence, obedience and cohesion is the existence or the perceived existence of a special relationship between particular members of a unit, especially a relationship of a romantic or sexual nature.

Mrs. Currie: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, if a relationship was seen in any way to be damaging to discipline, I would be against it as well? What concerns us is that, when no such relationship is going on and discipline is not damaged, these people can still be dismissed.

Dr. Reid: I shall cover that when I deal with the hon. Lady's clause. I shall later deal with the difference between having a code of conduct to deal with incidents when they arise, and increasing the circumstances that are likely to give rise to more incidents.

Mr. George Galloway (Glasgow, Hillhead): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dr. Reid: I shall certainly do that when I have finished this part of my speech.

Relationships which damage cohesion, such as those of a romantic or sexual nature, are particularly damaging. In situations in which such special relationships are most likely to develop in the armed forces, personnel are separated by gender. Therefore, as a matter of course in the armed forces, in the most intimate situations that are likely to lead to special relationships, a heterosexual is separated from the potential object of his or her sexual preference. Precisely the opposite circumstances would obtain for homosexuals, as they would be integrated in units with members of their own sex. That is the key problem, and it does not relate to prejudiced allegations of increased potential for promiscuity among homosexuals.

Mr. Galloway: I sympathise with my hon. Friend in his difficult job with his brief. He must be aware of the inherent and enormous contradiction between what he is saying and the obvious fact that it is possible and acceptable to be a homosexual member of a war Parliament or a war Cabinet, or a homosexual Secretary of State for Defence but not to be a homosexual private in the Royal Corps of Signals. There is an inherent absurdity in that proposition.

I put to my hon. Friend another contradiction in case he is not aware of it. I shall put to him a fantastic hypothesis. Suppose there were two homosexual members of a war Cabinet. Would that mean that that war Cabinet's effectiveness in waging and directing war might be compromised by a special relationship that might exist between those two Cabinet members?

Dr. Reid: I shall reply to my hon. Friend's points in reverse order. My hon. Friend asks about a war Cabinet. It is obvious that he completely missed the distinction that I drew between civilian and military life. My hon. Friend has given me a poisoned chalice. Without being facetious, I shall try to answer his first point. The difference between a Secretary of State for Defence and a member of an army unit is that the Secretary of State does not have to sleep every night with the Minister for Procurement or the Armed Forces Minister. *[Laughter.]* However, the member of an armed unit might have to sleep with a comrade.

I am not trying to bring levity to this sensitive and intractable subject. Hundreds of thousands of our fellow citizens want a serious debate. I do not suggest for a minute that such special relationships destroy operational effectiveness. I am suggesting that they would weaken operational effectiveness and in battle such a reduction could mean the loss of lives as well as the loss of battles.

I do not underestimate the weight of the arguments that have been advanced tonight because no liberty held to be precious in civilian society can be negated in the military as a matter of course or without justification. Prejudice is no ground on its own for the continuation of past practice, but nor can practical problems be wished away.

Sir Andrew Bowden (Brighton, Kemptown): I will be supporting the new clause tabled by my hon. Friend the

[Sir Andrew Bowden]

Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs. Currie), but the hon. Gentleman is indulging in disgraceful weasel words. He has tried to stand on both sides of the fence at the same time. He represents the Opposition Front-Bench team, which hopes one day to form a Government. If it cannot give leadership one way or the other, it is not fit to govern.

Dr. Reid: First, I have already made it plain that, for Labour Members, there is a free vote. Secondly, the hon. Gentleman can accuse me of many things tonight; one of them might not be representing Labour Members behind me, but to suggest that it shows cowardice or a lack of courage to put the argument that I am advancing is nonsense.

I do not underestimate those arguments about civil liberties, but there is another argument that, if that was controversial, is, I appreciate, even more sensitive, but must be put because it is felt generally to be important by members of the armed forces. I accept that their views are not sufficient to continue a ban, but they are one of the necessary elements that must be considered.

The argument involves a genuine concern that was put to me by a female soldier and it crystallises the case, so I can be brief. She said, "Dr. Reid, even in the imposed social intimacy of the Army, you and your colleagues at Westminster would defend my right to refuse to share the most intimate experiences of sleeping, sharing and bathing with a man. You would do that not because you assume evil intention on the part of the man, but because it offends my sensibilities as a woman, because it may offend my sense of privacy or decency or because I may feel that I am the object of inquisitive sexual observation by the man, but all the reasons why you would give me that right would be on my perceptions, not on the intentions of the man. If you change this rule, will you give me the right to protect my privacy if I refuse to shower with one of my lesbian colleagues?" I did not have a satisfactory answer for her then and, frankly, I do not now.

That sums up the second intractable conflict between trying to give the homosexual rights of privacy while balancing them with the heterosexual rights of privacy in the armed forces.

Mr. Peter Snape (West Bromwich, East): Will my hon. Friend acknowledge that those of us who served on the Select Committee and who talked to serving men and women think that some of their views, although my hon. Friends might not agree with them, deserve better consideration than being denounced as mere homophobia, and that they are genuine concerns? Their concerns about operational efficiency led me, him and other hon. Friends to put our names to the report.

Dr. Reid: I agree. Individuals have a range of feelings that are often difficult to classify because they range from irrational prejudices to moral perceptions. Sometimes, that distinction is not made, although I must say to my hon. Friend, who has been helpful, that there are hon. Members who will be in the same Division Lobby as me tonight who sometimes seem incapable of presenting a logical argument because they are blinded with prejudice.

There are logical, objective grounds for qualifying what is a very valuable civil right to preserve effectiveness. However, it is honourable and legitimate to say that the weight of the civil liberties argument is sufficiently great to overcome both the operational reduction in effectiveness and the case for privacy for heterosexuals. There is nothing dishonourable in making that balance and in arriving at a judgment that is different from mine, but the Labour Members of the Select Committee were not persuaded that that change was necessary.

I say again, however, that the decision was on balance. It was not taken lightly or without agonising. We fully recognise the clash of principle and the practical problems. We do not argue that the present position is perfect and, in particular, we entirely concur with tonight's speeches that have been directed at entrapment, agent provocateurs, harassment and, on occasions, disgusting treatment, which should not be meted out to any citizen in this country, in any condition. I have no time for any of that, and I hope that it will be stopped immediately.

8.45 pm

Mr. Michael Brown: I fully understand the particular responsibility that goes with the hon. Gentleman's position, the more so because he aspires to occupy the Treasury Bench, but the country needs to know what the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) would do if they ever became Ministers and were forced to act as a consequence of a European Court of Human Rights directive.

Dr. Reid: I was coming to the European Court of Human Rights, although I think that the hon. Gentleman will be slightly disappointed.

We have not argued that the position will never change. It will obviously be reviewed again during the next Parliament. No one here could be stupid enough to think that the issue will go away. I cannot imagine that it will not recur for reconsideration. It is not our job to guess the what the European Court of Human Rights will do, but we are aware that it is likely to be asked to issue a ruling on this matter during the next Parliament. We will have to cross that bridge when we come to it.

Mr. George Howarth (Knowsley, North): Although I will be in a different Lobby from my hon. Friend tonight and disagree with what he says, I respect the way in which he is putting his argument. On returning to the issue in future, does he agree that, if the new clause is defeated tonight, the people who believe, as I do, that the current position is wrong—and that should include the Government—must go out and sell the case to the armed services that they should no longer peddle prejudice as an excuse for excluding people from the armed services?

Dr. Reid: If I were advocating the case to members of the armed services, I would first stop trying to portray them as a bunch of redneck, thick-skulled and prejudiced bigots, although I am not saying that my hon. Friend is doing that. It is not helpful when they live in particular circumstances, deprived of the right to leave. Any of us tonight can choose which room to leave. We can choose to go if we do not like the company that we are sleeping with. In the morning, we can remove ourselves from a position that we find offensive. We do not have to shower with people. Members of the armed forces cannot make those choices. Let us recognise at least that their views are of merit, even if we must weigh in the balance the great issue of civil liberties.

Do not let us pretend—I do not think for a minute that the hon. Member for Brigg and Cleethorpes (Mr. Brown) has done so—that there is an easy or painless answer. Whatever decision is taken tonight or in the next Parliament, people will be hurt. Homosexuals or heterosexuals will be disappointed, perhaps angry. Whichever way the vote goes, one group or another will have their rights diminished, but, for the majority of hon. Members, it will not be a decision that is taken lightly because the curtailment of liberties or the loss of lives are considerations that rank highest in everything that we hold to be precious in the House. Whatever happens, the people who will then be asked by us to remain the ultimate defender of both those liberties and those lives will be the men and women of our British armed forces.

Mr. Soames: I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs. Currie) on the sensible, measured and passionate way in which she introduced this important debate. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Cleethorpes (Mr. Brown) and thank him for the extraordinary courtesy that he has shown me during the time that we have been discussing what is a very difficult matter for the armed forces.

We have had a useful debate and many of the most important issues have been aired. I propose to deal with them. I am grateful to my hon. Friends for providing with their amendment this opportunity to have a debate that has been waiting in the wings for several months. I am sure that they will have a pretty good idea of what I am about to say.

The services' policy on homosexuality is hardly a secret, and nor are the reasons underpinning it. That said, I shall start, perhaps surprisingly, by saying that much of the new clause causes us very little difficulty. Much of it is already unnecessary. We announced in 1992 that we had accepted the recommendation of the Select Committee on the previous Armed Forces Bill that homosexual acts which were legal in civilian life should no longer constitute offences under service law. The only extra condition was that the act should not involve the commission of a service offence such as the abuse of rank or other behaviour prejudicial to good order and discipline. That change in policy took immediate effect, but we were not able to make the necessary change to the legislation under the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994.

It is difficult to see how the first part of the amendment adds to what Parliament has already achieved. However, we have to vote on the whole amendment and my hon. Friends have insinuated into the middle of their amendment a sentence that is designed to change the services' policy on the exclusion of homosexuals, contrary to the unanimous recommendation of the Select Committee which has been considering the Bill. I shall concentrate the rest of my remarks on the Government's response to that issue.

The current policy of excluding homosexuals from the armed forces is not—I repeat, not—the result of a moral judgment. The prime concern of the armed forces is the maintenance of operational effectiveness and our policy derives from a practical assessment of the implications of homosexual orientation on military life. I do not believe that the services have a right to be different, but I firmly believe that they have a need to be different.

The conditions of military life are truly very different from civilian life. The hon. Member for Motherwell, North (Dr. Reid) made that point very well. Service personnel are regularly required to live in extremely close proximity to one another in shared, single-sex accommodation with limited privacy and sometimes under stressful conditions. They may have to work for long hours in physically close quarters, sometimes for long periods under demanding circumstances. We believe that those conditions, together with the need for absolute trust and confidence between all ranks, require that the potentially disruptive influence of homosexual orientation and behaviour be excluded.

As hon. Members will recall, the legality of our policy was challenged in the High Court last year by four former members of the services who had been discharged on the ground of their homosexuality. The court found that the policy was lawful and that ruling has been upheld by the Court of Appeal. Just recently, the House of Lords has refused leave to appeal further, so the lawfulness of our policy has been further vindicated.

Mr. Tony Banks: Does hon. Gentleman accept that there is undoubtedly a considerable number of homosexuals within the armed forces now? He must know that to be a fact. How is that affecting operational efficiency now?

Mr. Soames: There may well be some homosexual personnel in the armed forces but they choose to keep that to themselves. That is a matter for them. *[Interruption.]* I will deal with that later.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Cleethorpes mentioned the European Court. One can only speculate about what the European Court might say in several years' time because the issue has never been tested before it. We have considered the issue thoroughly, both as to what is required as a matter of national policy and the potential legal consequences. Our decision, in legal terms, is entirely respectable. We believe that our decision is the right one, and we will defend it robustly in any court.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness and Sutherland): When considering their position, did the Government consult other Governments, in countries such as Australia, where the law has been changed in the way suggested in the amendment and where they apparently have not experienced the practical difficulties that have been referred to by those who oppose the amendment?

Mr. Soames: The answer is, yes, we did consult other Governments. I shall deal with that point later, because it is extremely important.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire mentioned costs and the cost to the taxpayer. The basis of all the various figures that are bandied about is uncertain. What is clear from the review report is the significant adverse effect that a change of policy would have on recruitment and retention—I urge the House to accept that that is true—with the considerable cost penalties that would result.

Several hon. Members mentioned agent provocateurs. Evidence was given to the Select Committee by witnesses in the Ministry of Defence that the service police are not

[Mr. Soames]

allowed to carry out agent provocateur activity when inquiring into allegations of homosexual activity. I wish to assure the House that I will not tolerate such action.

The hon. Member for Newham, South (Mr. Spearing) raised the question of a code of conduct.

Sir Terence Higgins (Worthing): On the use of resources, does my hon. Friend agree that it would not be a sensible, economic or efficient use of resources to identify those who are homosexual and who, in his own words, wish to keep it to themselves?

Mr. Soames: Yes, I agree with my right hon. Friend.

While a new code of conduct might appear to be symmetrical in its effect on heterosexuals and homosexuals, it would not solve the problem of anticipated loss of cohesion or operational effectiveness caused by the knowledge or strong suspicion of the sexual identity of homosexual personnel. We do not believe that a code of conduct, no matter how rigorously enforced, would adequately address the issues of privacy or decency and it would not be possible or desirable to provide separate facilities for homosexuals and heterosexuals.

Mr. Eddie Loyden (Liverpool, Garston): What the Minister has just said is tantamount to saying that this is gesture politics. I am one of the diminishing band of hon. Members who went through the whole of the second world war. There was no discrimination then. I was in no fewer than seven troop ships carrying men and women to the four corners of the globe to fight on behalf of the nation. There were no questions about homosexuality then. What the Government are saying is the height of hypocrisy. If there was a war tomorrow, there would be no discrimination against homosexuals or lesbians. They would be dragged in just as they were in 1939.

Mr. Soames: That was a splendid sally from the hon. Gentleman. [HON. MEMBERS: "Answer the question."] I will, if I may develop my argument in my own time.

The hon. and learned Member for Fife, North–East (Mr. Campbell) asked about other countries, and the hon. Member for Caithness and Sutherland (Mr. Maclennan) has just done the same. The report went into great detail on the matter and covered many different countries, and we are aware that in some countries homosexuality is not a formal bar to service, although there may be restrictions on the areas in which homosexuals are employed and on their career progression.

However, we do not consider that the policies of other countries towards their armed forces are necessarily relevant to our own, as they may be influenced by other factors, such as conscription and domestic employment laws. The situation in other countries simply cannot be compared with that of our armed forces, which are, as the hon. Member for Caithness and Sutherland knows, wholly different from conscript armies and other foreign operators.

Several hon. Members have referred to comparisons with race and sex discrimination. However, the review report shows that homosexuality creates insoluble problems of decency and privacy, as race and gender do not. I shall quote an extract from a report by General Colin Powell, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in America:

"Unlike race or gender, sexuality is not a benign trait. It is manifested in behaviour. While it would be decidedly biased to assume certain behaviours based on gender or membership in a racial group, the same is not true for sexuality. We have successfully mixed rich and poor, black and white, male and female, but open homosexuality in units is not just the acceptance of benign characteristics such as colour or gender or background. It involves matters of privacy and human sexuality that, in our judgment, if allowed to exist openly in the military, would affect the cohesion and well-being of the force. It asks us to deal with fundamental issues that the society at large has not yet been able to deal with".

Mr. Betts *rose—*

Mr. Soames: No, I must get on.

I now wish to return—

Mr. Betts: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Soames: No, I will not.

I wish now to return to the subject of Great Britain. The High Court recommended that we should review our policy in the light of changing social circumstances, and of the experience of other countries where homosexuality is not a formal bar to service. Accordingly, the internal review was carried out.

The review took into account the policies and practices of overseas armed forces, the views of serving personnel, the advice of senior military commanders and the full range of evidence presented in the report. The report of the assessment was placed in the Library on 4 March.

After detailed consideration of the available evidence, the assessment team concluded that homosexuality remained incompatible with service life, if the armed forces were to be maintained at their full potential operational effectiveness. The team recommended that there should be no change in current policy. My Department has accepted that recommendation and, as I said earlier, the Select Committee, after much careful deliberation, agreed that there should be no change in the policy.

Both the evidence contained in the assessment team's detailed and thorough report, and that given in open session to the Select Committee, show that the presence of openly homosexual men and women in the armed forces would have an adverse effect on morale and unit cohesion.

Mr. Betts: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Soames: No, I will not.

That presence would also affect operational effectiveness. That we cannot risk, and we shall not accept it.

Uncertainty and suspicion about the sexual orientation of fellow service personnel are just as likely to cause unease, polarise relationships and disrupt unit cohesion as overt homosexuality.

Ms Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Soames: No, I will not. I must get on.

It would be quite wrong to ignore the strongly held views of the majority of service men and women that the admission of homosexuals would have a detrimental effect on operational effectiveness, and I shall not do so. In the face of all the evidence presented by my Department, of substantial submissions both oral and written from those who wished to change the policy, and also of the evidence that it gathered privately, the Select Committee concluded that the policy should continue.

If collective professional judgments about operational effectiveness are simply to be defined away in advance as irrelevant prejudice unless they fit abstract principles of equal treatment, service men and women will be silenced and disfranchised by a decision that would affect them more than anyone else. That would both be morally questionable and put at risk the cohesion and fighting power of our armed forces.

Mr. Tony Banks: Rubbish.

9 pm

Mr. Soames: It is not rubbish.

It is significant and perhaps inevitable that the most widely reported spokesman of the homosexual movement, Sir Ian McKellen, took exactly that attitude. He said:

"Why are Ministers even asking the military?"

The not so hidden agenda of those who want to change Ministry of Defence policy is to steamroller aside the judgments, experience and wishes of the military.

Although we have no desire to discriminate against homosexuals, or indeed against any other minority, the Government will not capitulate to such doctrinaire attitudes. What is special about the military is the fact that we expect them to exhibit commitment and self sacrifice beyond that of any other professional group and, if need be, to sacrifice their lives. They put their trust in the Government and it would be immoral, as well as operationally highly detrimental, to overrule or ignore them.

Let me make it clear—this is not about homophobia in the armed forces. Rather it is a clear indication of the ability of service men and women to differentiate between their own personal views on homosexuality—which are often tolerant and sympathetic—and what they nevertheless perceive to be the effect of homosexuality in a military environment. I know that no Member of the House will vote on the new clause without having carefully weighed up the issues. These are not simple, since they summon up an apparent conflict between individual rights and wishes—which none of us lightly sets aside—and the moral cohesion, effectiveness and fighting power of the armed forces.

The services of this country are very special, and they are a unique and extraordinary asset to our nation. They serve us faithfully and well, and they are—by and large—men and women of a quality not found in any other institution in the land. The extraordinarily gallant record of our armed forces—in the Falklands, through 25 years of exceptional gallantry and skill on the streets and countryside of Northern Ireland, in the Gulf, and today in Bosnia, Rwanda and Angola—is beyond compare.

My overriding duty must be to maintain the effectiveness of our armed forces. In my view, that should also be the prime concern of the House of Commons. In my view, the armed forces have earned the right to be allowed to get on with the job they do so well and not be bludgeoned out of the standards, traditions and esprit de corps that has won Great Britain every war in which we have engaged since 1812. That being the case, I strongly urge the Committee to reject the new clause.

Mrs. Currie: This has been a superb debate, showing the House of Commons at its very best. I would like to thank those hon. Members from both sides of the House who have expressed their support for the new clause. The matter is already before the European Court of Human Rights, which we helped set up four decades ago. [HON. MEMBERS: "What about democracy?"] I say to my hon. Friends that I agree with them. I would rather that this House decided on the issue. The Committee has the power to do so, and it should decide tonight.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 120, Noes 188.

Division No. 125] **[9.07 pm**

AYES

Allen, Graham
Alton, David
Anderson, Ms Janet *(Ros'dale)*
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beckett, Rt Hon Margaret
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Bermingham, Gerald
Betts, Clive
Boateng, Paul
Bowden, Sir Andrew
Bradley, Keith
Bray, Dr Jeremy
Brown, Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, M *(Brigg & Cl'thorpes)*
Brown, N *(N'c'tle upon Tyne E)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burden, Richard
Byers, Stephen
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(Fife NE)*
Carlile, Alexander *(Montgomery)*
Carrington, Matthew
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clark, Dr David *(South Shields)*
Clarke, Tom *(Monklands W)*
Clwyd, Mrs Ann
Coffey, Ann
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Currie, Mrs Edwina *(S D'by'ire)*
Darling, Alistair
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Bryan *(Oldham C'tral)*
Denham, John
Dobson, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Etherington, Bill
Fatchett, Derek
Field, Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fraser, John
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Garrett, John
Gerrard, Neil
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Gordon, Mildred
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Harman, Ms Harriet
Harvey, Nick
Hattersley, Rt Hon Roy
Hayes, Jerry
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Howarth, Alan *(Strat'rd-on-A)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley North)*
Hoyle, Doug
Hughes, Robert G *(Harrow W)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark)*
Jackson, Glenda *(H'stead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Sheff'ld, H)*
Jones, Lynne *(B'ham S O)*
Jowell, Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross,C&S)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Lestor, Joan *(Eccles)*
Lloyd, Tony *(Stretford)*
Loyden, Eddie
McFall, John
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclennan, Robert
McMaster, Gordon
McNamara, Kevin
Madden, Max
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Michael
Michael, Alun
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Morris, Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Paul
O'Brien, Mike *(N W'kshire)*
Pike, Peter L
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Bridget *(Lew'm E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*

Primarolo, Dawn
Quin, Ms Joyce
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rowe, Andrew *(Mid Kent)*
Salmond, Alex
Scott, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
Sedgemore, Brian
Short, Clare
Simpson, Alan
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Andrew *(Oxford East)*
Smith, Chris *(Isl'ton S & F'sbury)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Straw, Jack
Timms, Stephen
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Wallace, James
Watson, Mike
Wray, Jimmy

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Tony Banks and
Mr. Harry Cohen.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(East Surrey)*
Alexander, Richard
Alison, Rt Hon Michael *(Selby)*
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, James
Arnold, Jacques *(Gravesham)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Nicholas *(North Dorset)*
Baldry, Tony
Banks, Matthew *(Southport)*
Bellingham, Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Booth, Hartley
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Eltham)*
Bowis, John
Boyson, Rt Hon Sir Rhodes
Brandreth, Gyles
Brazier, Julian
Bright, Sir Graham
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burt, Alistair
Carlisle, John *(Luton North)*
Carlisle, Sir Kenneth *(Lincoln)*
Carttiss, Michael
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coe, Sebastian
Colvin, Michael
Congdon, David
Conway, Derek
Coombs, Anthony *(Wyre For'st)*
Cope, Rt Hon Sir John
Couchman, James
Cran, James
Davies, Quentin *(Stamford)*
Day, Stephen
Dixon, Don
Dover, Den
Duncan, Alan
Dunn, Bob
Durant, Sir Anthony
Evans, David *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Evans, Jonathan *(Brecon)*
Evans, Nigel *(Ribble Valley)*
Evans, Roger *(Monmouth)*
Evennett, David
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fenner, Dame Peggy
Field, Barry *(Isle of Wight)*
Fishburn, Dudley
Forman, Nigel
Forth, Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Freeman, Rt Hon Roger
French, Douglas
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Bruce
Gill, Christopher
Goodlad, Rt Hon Alastair
Goodson-Wickes, Dr Charles
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorst, Sir John
Greenway, John *(Ryedale)*
Griffiths, Peter *(Portsmouth, N)*
Grylls, Sir Michael
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archibald
Hanley, Rt Hon Jeremy
Hannam, Sir John
Hargreaves, Andrew
Harris, David
Hawkins, Nick
Hawksley, Warren
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hendry, Charles
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hunt, Rt Hon David *(Wirral W)*
Hunt, Sir John *(Ravensbourne)*
Jack, Michael
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom
Kirkhope, Timothy
Knapman, Roger
Knight, Mrs Angela *(Erewash)*
Knight, Rt Hon Greg *(Derby N)*
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamont, Rt Hon Norman
Lawrence, Sir Ivan
Legg, Barry
Lennox-Boyd, Sir Mark
Lewis, Terry
Lidington, David
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Lord, Michael
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maitland, Lady Olga
Malone, Gerald
Mans, Keith
Marlow, Tony
Marshall, Sir Michael *(Arundel)*
Mayhew, Rt Hon Sir Patrick
Mellor, Rt Hon David
Merchant, Piers
Mills, Iain
Mitchell, Andrew *(Gedling)*
Mitchell, Sir David *(NW Hants)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Moss, Malcolm
Nelson, Anthony
Neubert, Sir Michael
Nicholls, Patrick
Nicholson, David *(Taunton)*
Norris, Steve
Onslow, Rt Hon Sir Cranley
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Patnick, Sir Irvine
Patten, Rt Hon John
Pattie, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Pawsey, James
Pickles, Eric
Porter, David *(Waveney)*
Rathbone, Tim
Reid, Dr John
Richards, Rod
Riddick, Graham
Robathan, Andrew
Roberts, Rt Hon Sir Wyn
Ross, William *(E Londonderry)*
Rumbold, Rt Hon Dame Angela
Sackville, Tom
Sainsbury, Rt Hon Sir Timothy
Shephard, Rt Hon Gillian
Shepherd, Sir Colin *(Hereford)*
Shersby, Sir Michael
Skeet, Sir Trevor
Snape, Peter
Soames, Nicholas
Spellar, John
Spencer, Sir Derek
Spicer, Sir James *(W Dorset)*
Spicer, Sir Michael *(S Worcs)*
Spink, Dr Robert
Steen, Anthony
Stephen, Michael
Streeter, Gary
Sweeney, Walter
Sykes, John
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy *(Southend, E)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomason, Roy
Thompson, Sir Donald *(C'er V)*
Thompson, Patrick *(Norwich N)*
Townsend, Cyril D *(Bexl'yh'th)*
Turner, Dennis
Viggors, Peter
Walden, George
Waller, Gary
Ward, John
Wardle, Charles *(Bexhill)*
Watts, John
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Ann
Wiggin, Sir Jerry
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macc'fld)*
Wolfson, Mark
Wood, Timothy
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Simon Burns and
Dr. Liam Fox.

Question accordingly negatived.

Title

Amendment made: No. 80, in line 5, leave out 'fingerprinting of' and insert

'taking of fingerprints and samples from'.—*[Mr. Soames.]*

Bill reported, with amendments.

Order for Third Reading read.—[Queen's Consent, on behalf of the Crown, signified.]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the Bill be now read the Third time.—*[Mr. Soames.]*

9.19 pm

Mr. Cohen: There are issues that show that, contrary to what the Minister would have us believe, all is not fine in the armed forces. I shall concentrate on one example—racism. The Commission for Racial Equality recently issued a report on the Household Cavalry, about which there was subsequently a formal investigation. That report has not been mentioned during the Bill's passage, but it should have been properly dealt with by the Minister.

I have a summary of the report. It points out that the Household Cavalry ran its own mobile display team, which visited primarily small rural towns that were

"distant from the main centres of ethnic minority population."

The Household Cavalry recruited through regimental associations that tended

"to reach only white people linked through family and other connections with former members of the Regiment."

Its recruiters were also largely located

"away from centres of ethnic minority populations."

The Household Cavalry recruited purely a white force, which became apparent in the number—it was nil—of its ethnic minority recruits. The summary states:

"There were about 3,000 ethnic minority applicants to the Army between 1989 and 1994, but none of them were recruited to the Household Cavalry.

The weight of evidence was that some at least of these had been steered away to other regiments."

A key point is:

"The Inspector of Recruiting said that recruiters would send ethnic minority recruits to local regiments instead of to the Household Division where they would have a hard time."

The summary goes on to state:

"A member of the MDT had said that the Household Cavalry did not recruit ethnic minorities.

An ethnic minority applicant was deterred by others telling him not to go into the Guards because 'they hate blacks'.

One ethnic minority recruit to the Household Cavalry in the mid 1980s had experienced a 'barrage of racism' during his training and afterwards.

In the year after the CRE launched the investigation, there were three ethnic minority recruits to the Household Cavalry, reversing the total absence in the preceding five years."

Later, the summary states:

"The Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers officer in command had passed the content of this briefing on to the warrant officer second in command, and was not surprised to be told by him that he had got the posting changed because"—

Corporal Malcolm, who subsequently made the complaint—

"was black."

The CRE concludes:

"that the Commanding Officer had, in effect, given an unlawful discriminatory instruction to the officer in command of the REME detachment."

That was a scathing report on the racism existing in the Household Cavalry.

I know that the British Army, through the Ministry of Defence, is now committed to a five-year programme of measures to promote racial equality, which is to be implemented in close liaison with the CRE, but that two-year examination of the Household Cavalry found that there had been racial discrimination in recruitment and transfers, and racial abuse and harassment in individual cases.

The Ministry of Defence almost had racial equality measures imposed on it. Only after discussions did it agree to introduce them voluntarily. It had to sign a formal agreement that it would.

I put it to the Minister that the report was damning, the action is now extremely late and implementation of racial equality measures in the Army should be treated as a matter of urgency. The same applies to the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy, which should fall into line quickly with action, programmes and policies of their own to end racial discrimination. I know that, if that does not happen, the Ministry risks having a non-discrimination notice imposed on it next year. It is important that it implements racial equality measures. In its press release in response to the report on the Household Cavalry, the Campaign for Racial Equality said:

"we can only regret the length of time it has taken the Armed Forces to adopt these measures."

There have been appalling cases of racism in the armed forces. I have examples of plenty of them. An article in *The Guardian* of 5 March gave many. A man called Scott Enion, who fought in the Gulf with the British forces, is now considering taking his case to the European Court of Human Rights because of the racism that he encountered. He said in *The Guardian*:

"I wouldn't recommend the Army to any young black person . . . Lots of people just told me to shrug off the abuse but these problems will continue until the Army makes racist behaviour a specific offence. No amount of publicity is going to attract black people to the Army until the top ranks start clamping down on it. At the moment, they are allowed to get away with it and most blacks know the Army is a racist institution."

Although the Minister claims that the Government are out to recruit more people from the ethnic minorities—indeed, there is a crisis in recruitment—the number of recruits from ethnic minorities dropped by 25 per cent. last year. The figures for 1994-95 show that the total was just 1 per cent. in the Navy, 0.9 per cent. in the Army and 0.5 per cent. in the RAF. That compares with an ethnic minority population of 6 per cent. in Britain as a whole.

There really is a danger. As we saw in the previous debate on homosexuals and lesbians in the armed forces, the Army does not want to comply with standards that are accepted as standard elsewhere in the country or to respect civil liberties. In his reply to the debate on new clause, the Minister quoted Colin Powell of the United States forces as saying that discrimination against homosexuals was different from racism, but it is not different in relation to how people are treated by the armed forces. In both cases, the armed forces say that the standards that apply in the community at large do not apply to them. By adopting that approach, the armed services run a risk of becoming a nation within a nation and not properly reflecting the society they serve. That is a dangerous state of affairs in a democratic country.

The report on the Household Cavalry was scathing. The Conservative Government have been in power for 17 years, but they have made no attempt to tackle racism in the armed forces until now—and they are doing so only because the issue was forced upon them by the Commission for Racial Equality.

The Minister mentioned General Colin Powell. The top military man in the United States is a black man. No black man is anywhere near a position of power in the British Army. A black person in the United Kingdom armed forces is probably lucky to reach the rank of sergeant.

The Minister and the Government have displayed enormous complacency in respect of racism in the armed forces. It has continued for 17 years and it has been exposed by the CRE report on the Household Cavalry. I suspect that it will be left to a Labour Government—hopefully, in the not-too-distant future—to tackle racism in the armed forces so that they represent all the people in our nation.

9.29 pm

Mr. Viggers: The Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill is a most interesting Committee on which to serve. It was a great honour to be its Chairman for the second time in 10 years.

Paragraph 4 of the Select Committee report, which I wrote, states:

"It has been the policy of successive Governments to preserve consistency, as far as appropriate . . . between civilian and military law."

[Mr. Viggers]

However, there is some tension:

"Civilian law may reflect changing social attitudes, and these have in recent years involved some relaxation of the stricter discipline and formal personal relationships of former generations. On the other hand, the Armed Forces derive strength from their structured environment and from military discipline . . . The Committee has been very conscious of the serious and sensitive issues involved in deciding when military law and practice should be consistent with civilian law".

There have been a number of important issues for the Select Committee to consider, some of which are outside the scope of the Bill. We took evidence over nine sittings and considered a wealth of written material. We did more work and received more paper than any previous Committee, to produce a more substantial Bill.

I should like to thank the Committee members who helped our work to proceed swiftly and in a spirit of co-operation and good-humour. That was reflected in the need for only one Division, which was also good-humoured, forced by the hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George).

I welcome the significant improvements to the courts martial system in the Bill, which introduces a greater element of independence.

The future of the royal naval college, Greenwich excited much interest and local concern. As a loyal Conservative, it is better for me not to look at the starting point and the narrative, but to consider the conclusion, which is immensely satisfactory and better than we could have dreamt of at the beginning of our deliberations.

I am grateful for the constructive attitude of my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence, who took a personal interest in the issue. My hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces more than met our concerns with an amendment proposed in Committee which was made to the Bill.

The hon. Member for Leyton (Mr. Cohen), a colleague on the North Atlantic Assembly, referred to the report by the Commission for Racial Equality into allegations of racism in the Household Cavalry. Let me reassure him about the bilateral nature of our approach to the Bill by telling him that, when I discovered the Commission for Racial Equality was about to produce its report, I suggested to the Committee—which readily agreed—that we should postpone our deliberation of matters relating to racial equality until it had been published. We then called witnesses from the Ministry of Defence and made absolutely sure that it was committed to the policy that it had signed with the Commission for Racial Equality.

On Second Reading, I drew attention to the fact that, despite all good intentions, recruitment into the armed forces of those in ethnic minorities had fallen. I am convinced, however, that the Commission for Racial Equality and the Ministry of Defence have reached a firm and clear agreement. Although it is a five-year programme, it will not end after five years; it will commence now and be active immediately. We have received assurances from the Ministry of Defence that it will provide a definitive statement of its position before the next sitting of the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill in four to five years time. That is the long-stop position, and there will be positive action in the meantime.

Some people will no doubt be disappointed by the Committee's conclusions on current policy on homosexuality. After studying the findings of the MOD's comprehensive review and talking to many personnel across the ranks in all three services, as well as to serving personnel in other armed forces, it was impossible to conclude other than that the presence of openly homosexual personnel would cause significant difficulties for commanding officers and other ranks. The risks to operational effectiveness are real. Unless and until that alters, any policy change would be difficult to justify.

Having spoken to representatives of the armed forces of other countries, I am not persuaded that any other country has achieved a more effective system of rules than ours. There has been an assumption in much of the debate in the House that everything is inexorably moving one way—a kind of ratchet—towards liberality without firm, clear standards. In evidence from gay rights activists, we were told that prejudice is immoral. A large number of people in this country and in the armed forces believe that not only prejudice, but homosexuality, is immoral. It may be that the tide is not moving all in one direction.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): Is that the hon. Gentleman's opinion?

Mr. Viggers: I have expressed a point of view that I believe to be widely held in this country. I do not believe that the view is universally held that the movement is all one way and that movement towards liberality is inexorable. That is my personal view; it is not expressed in any other representational capacity.

Consideration of a measure such as the Armed Forces Bill by a Select Committee every five years is a useful way of keeping a check on matters relating to discipline in the armed forces, and we were of course happy to commend the Bill to the House.

I want to give three final votes of thanks. Two are serious and one may sound slightly frivolous. I want to express, first, thanks for the work contributed by the Ministry of Defence. A year or more ago, the MOD set up a team ably led by David Woodhead to deal specifically with the Select Committee on the Bill. That team, and the Ministry as a whole, responded quickly, efficiently and generously to our requests for information and facilities—such as travel and the opportunity to meet forces personnel. I am sure that the Committee would want me to give the most generous vote of thanks to the Ministry and all its staff. I should be grateful if the Minister would make sure that those thanks are conveyed in the most suitable manner.

The Committee would wish me to thank also Chris Shaw, who is the second Clerk to the Defence Committee but who was nominated as the Clerk to the Select Committee on the Bill as his first clerkship of a Select Committee. He has carried his job through exceptionally well, not only in briefing me and other members of the Committee, but in preparing the draft report, which was first-class.

Finally, I give perhaps a more frivolous vote of thanks to the United States 4th Cavalry for providing two Blackhawk helicopters, which got four members of the Committee back from Tuzla to Split in time to catch our Royal Air Force VC10—without which we would not necessarily have had a Government majority in the final stages of the Committee. I thank the US army air force for its contribution to the Committee's work.

9.37 pm

Mr. George: Having heard those last remarks of the hon. Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers), I am not so sure that I would have been happy to join him in a Blackhawk if I had known that it was to do service to the Government Whips Office. However, our journey was expedited by the cavalry, who came to the rescue—leaving a rather forlorn American-built, but RAF-owned, Chinook on the runway in eastern Tuzla. I experienced some horror in Bosnia when I switched on an old television set and saw Question Time live. That was probably the worst thing I saw during four days in the former Yugoslavia.

Having heard the debate of the past two hours, I have mixed feelings about volunteering to serve on the Select Committee. The procedure reinforced my view that a Select Committee approach is preferable to a Standing Committee approach. Although not everyone will agree with the consensual approach that we are obliged to take on defence issues, I am pleased that the consensus has largely returned on most security issues in the House and, to a great extent, in the country as a whole.

I am sorry that the Select Committee on Defence has not assumed responsibility for dealing with this quinquennial legislation, but we did the next best thing by having four members of that Select Committee, including the Chairman, on the Select Committee on the Bill. The combined approach of part Select Committee and part Standing Committee allows the special Select Committee to do what cannot be done in a Standing Committee environment, which is almost invariably non-consensual. It allows the Select Committee to discuss in detail the rationale, if there is one, behind a series of policies emanating from the Ministry of Defence.

By taking the Select Committee approach, we can exert more influence on the Ministry of Defence instead of allowing a Minister, with his aides behind him and his loyalists endorsing him, to railroad any old policy through a Standing Committee. That appears to be the normal approach to many pieces of legislation. It is a shame that the Government and the Opposition do not connive more frequently to approach legislation in a way more like the Select Committees.

The Select Committee was able to exert an influence over the daft policy of selling or leasing Greenwich naval college and, in that sense, the whole exercise was worth while. It was also very important that we provided a forum for discussion of the Commission for Racial Equality's report on the Household Cavalry, which put more pressure than there would otherwise have been on the Ministry of Defence. As someone who has served for many years on the Defence Committee, I recall time and again trying to enthuse the Ministry of Defence, through the Committee, about ethnic monitoring. The Ministry had its fall coming to it. Remarkably, it was not a parliamentary Committee that put pressure on the Government; it required an external body—the Commission for Racial Equality. The Select Committee provided a forum for that report and never was a fall more deserved, swifter or more full than that embarrassing climbdown by the Government. It really taught them.

The Minister has, on previous occasions, questioned my knowledge of military history. He said that we had not lost a war since 1802, but I must remind him that that war was a draw as opposed to a loss. For a military defeat, the Minister needs to go back much further. We lost several battles around 1802, but the war did not end in defeat.

Mr. Viggers: As the hon. Gentleman is an historian, can he remind me what happened in South Africa at the beginning of this century?

Mr. George: South Africa was a dishonourable draw: it was not a military defeat.

When our endeavours began, the Ministry of Defence got off to a bad start. It was forced on to the back foot within about three minutes of the beginning of our deliberations on the issue of consolidation of legislation. The previous Committee had strongly recommended that single-service legislation needed to be examined more closely and tidied up.

To our embarrassment, and even more to the embarrassment of the Ministry of Defence, the witnesses, who were not responsible for the policy failure, had to explain to the Committee why, despite starting with the MOD and trying to follow up the recommendations of the previous Select Committee, their movement and enthusiasm came to a dramatic halt. They had to appear before the previous Select Committee to explain why they had done nothing to follow and take up the recommendations of the Committee before it. I hope that, when the Committee is re-formed four and a half years from now, there will be substantial adherence to our recommendations.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell, North (Dr. Reid) on a courageous speech shortly before the final Division. It is not easy, in such circumstances, to make such a speech from the Opposition Benches. It was not easy to support the new clause in the Lobby. We who gave our support may suffer the consequences for our position and our honesty. I voted willingly on the issue, as I did in the Select Committee.

I am sure that the Minister will not agree with me when I say that everything that has been done in this place has provided a stay of execution for present policy. Having read the advice of the Ministry's legal adviser on the likely consequences of the European Court of Human Rights when considering the MOD's policy, I believe that it is almost inevitable that the line that the majority of the House has taken, and the line taken by the MOD, will become increasingly difficult to sustain.

The report commissioned by the MOD contained a proposal, although it is not presented as such, that might be seen as a fall-back position if all else fails. It was not a version of the United States policy, but one in that general direction. I am sure that the Minister will not tell the House that the Government are even considering a fall-back position. He and his fellow Ministers will sustain the MOD's line vigorously in the European Court of Human Rights or in any legal or media forums in which anyone may be obliged to speak or appear.

If there is any furtiveness, I hope that serious consideration will be given, as it was in the United States, to commissioning a study similar to that pursued by the Rand Corporation in Santa Monica on what could be done within the military to prepare a way for an eventual change in policy. That may seem unpalatable now, but I feel that serious consideration must be given to such an approach.

On reflection, I am delighted, despite my initial reservations, to have participated in the Committee

[Mr. George]

proceedings. As our Chairman said, the staff of the Select Committee were excellent. We had good relationships and there were some amusing contretemps with the witnesses. We were all seeking a common objective—a legal framework within which men and women may serve within the armed forces. I do not patronise them when I say that they are probably the best service men and women in the world.

Those service men and women may be criticised. Lee Clegg was referred to by some of my hon. Friends, who implied that, somehow, he was a murderer. That is insulting nonsense. It was also implied that the men in Cyprus who besmirched the reputation of Britain's armed forces were in some way not an aberration. They were an aberration.

I was angered by that debate, because I have seen British soldiers in the most appalling conditions throughout the world—in the Falklands, in some barracks in Britain and certainly in Northern Ireland. They are men and women who offer their services to the country in a way that few hon. Members can comprehend. There are few people who understand what young and not so young men and women sacrifice in order to earn not a miserable but an unsatisfactory salary.

I am not making a political point. Those men and women are experiencing the traumas of a reorientation of our armed forces following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. We should see as typical those people, not the men who did such damage to the reputation of the armed forces, the Ministry of Defence and the British in Cyprus and throughout the world. We can be justly proud of the men and women who are serving us.

I hope that I shall be in a position to serve on the Select Committee that considers the next Bill five years from now. I hope that even more members of the Defence Committee will serve on that Committee, which showed that it is possible to develop a common approach to serious issues.

I hope that the magnanimity that I showed in not pressing amendment No. 81 to a Division, when I would clearly have won, so allowing the Minister to avoid experiencing defeat within three hours of the beginning of the debate, will be reciprocated by the Minister's coming before the Defence Committee with an open mind and listening seriously to our arguments.

I hope that the spirit of tolerance that has been shown by some Opposition Members will be duly rewarded with a compromise that at the moment is not evident. I hope that the consensual spirit that the Minister has experienced so recently will be continued, not in this Committee, which has now ceased to exist, but in the Defence Committee which will pick up a number of issues that were raised by the Select Committee on the Bill.

9.52 pm

Mr. Michael Stephen (Shoreham): This House of Commons has this evening made a momentous decision in refusing to overturn the British armed forces' long-standing policy that homosexuality is incompatible with military service. That is a delicate matter upon which many hon. Members have held and expressed genuine and passionate views on both sides.

We decided that question after careful deliberation. It was one of the best debates that I have ever heard in the House. All points of view were considered. We drew upon our own experiences and we listened to the experiences of other hon. Members, often eloquently expressed. I was particularly impressed by the contribution to the debate of the hon. Member for Motherwell, North (Dr. Reid).

One of the most important points in the debate was that the question had to be decided according to United Kingdom conditions. We were referred to the experiences of other countries. It is clear that other countries, including other European countries, have their own cultures and their armed forces have their own traditions, and that what succeeds or fails in their countries and in their armed forces may not necessarily be a good guide to what we should do here.

But having made the decision on the basis of United Kingdom conditions, and after careful deliberation in this sovereign Parliament, I have one important concern, and that is that the whole exercise may have been completely academic. The European Court of Human Rights, we are told, is going to overrule the decision.

During the debate, reference was made not only to that court but to the European Court of Justice. The two institutions are very different, and there is in particular an important difference between them in respect of the question that we have just decided. Defence matters are specifically excluded from the competence of the European Union, and the European Court of Justice would therefore have no right to decide whether homosexuality should be allowed in Britain's armed forces.

I think that it would be outrageous if the European Court of Justice used equal opportunities legislation to seek to intervene in defence matters, which are specifically excluded from its competence. I find it extraordinary that the British Government conceded the point in relation to pregnant service women, and I hope that they will never again concede that the European Court of Justice has any jurisdiction in respect of defence.

We are bound by the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights because we are signatories to the European convention on human rights. Defence matters are not exempted from that court's jurisdiction, as they are from the competence of the European Union. It is therefore open to the court, when the case comes before it—as it undoubtedly will—to overrule the decision that we have made, after careful deliberation, in this United Kingdom House of Commons. If it did so, that would be an extremely important constitutional matter.

The European Court of Human Rights exists by virtue of a convention signed at the end of the second world war to protect the peoples of Europe from the gross abuses of human rights that were perpetrated during and before that war. It was not signed in order to allow a foreign court to interfere at will in this country's domestic affairs, and to overrule the will of this sovereign Parliament. The House must warn the European Court of Human Rights of the danger into which it may fall. It should be fully aware of that danger before deciding this case, and it should be aware that this sovereign Parliament has the right—although we do not wish to exercise it—to give notice, under article 65 of the convention, of its intention to withdraw from that convention if need be.

9.57 pm

Mr. Soames: I warmly endorse the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers), and thank him for being such an admirable Chairman. I join him in

paying tribute to the Clerk and the Committee for all the work they did. As the hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. Bruce) said, we had a very good cross-party debate. We dealt with important points; Bills such as this are important. As everyone agrees, it is important for the armed forces to know that justice is not only done but seen to be done, and I believe that their affairs were well investigated and looked after by the Committee.

I also join my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport in warmly thanking the Ministry of Defence Bill team, the parliamentary branch of the MOD, my heroic parliamentary private secretary—my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, South (Mr. Hawkins)—and all who contributed to the superb job that the Committee has done.

The Bill both preserves and improves the system of discipline in the armed forces, and I warmly commend it to the House. We have settled many important matters. I heard what my hon. Friend the Member for Shoreham (Mr. Stephen) said; no one could gainsay the important points he made. The hon. Member for Walsall, South also made important points.

Let me reassure the hon. Member for Leyton (Mr. Cohen) that we take the question of the Commission for Racial Equality very seriously. Some of what he said was very wide of the mark. It is not in our interests not to encourage all the recruits that we can get, wherever they come from; we need more, not fewer recruits from ethnic minorities in the armed forces, and they are very welcome. If the hon. Gentleman can offer me helpful suggestions as to how we can better achieve that, we shall pay considerable attention to them.

We thank all who took part in the Bill's passage, and to our armed forces, wherever they may be—in Bosnia, Saudi Arabia or Turkey—we send our warmest wishes, and our thanks for all that they do for this country.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

Royal Maternity Hospital, Belfast

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Wells.]*

9.59 pm

Dr. Joe Hendron (Belfast, West): I am grateful for this opportunity to draw to the attention of the House a proposal that threatens one of Northern Ireland's most respected and renowned hospitals with an international reputation for innovation and research. It is the Royal maternity hospital, Belfast, which is an integral part of the Royal hospitals trust and is facing possible closure. Access to and from the four hospitals is simplicity itself and they are only about 150 m from each other. That is the geography, and when that is understood one can appreciate why over 85 per cent. of Northern Ireland's population can reach the Royal hospitals inside an hour.

In a typical year, one family in three in Northern Ireland is seen in some department of the Royal hospitals. I emphasise that I speak not just as a politician but as a medical practitioner who has spent all his medical life in west Belfast where these great hospitals are situated.

I shall explain why I have asked for the debate. The Northern Ireland Department of Health and Social Services, acting on behalf of the Minister, established a committee, the acute hospitals reorganisation project, under the chairmanship of Dr. James McKenna, a former chief medical officer for Northern Ireland. The committee is considering ways to eliminate unnecessary duplication of services by the Royal hospitals trust and Belfast City hospital, Northern Ireland's two largest hospitals.

The committee, which includes representatives from both hospitals, was asked to make proposals as to how services could best be redeployed between the two to make the best possible use of resources in terms of specialist staff, accommodation and, presumably, finance because, inevitably, it was hoped that these proposals would bring about some savings in the Northern Ireland health service.

It being Ten o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Wells.]*

Dr. Hendron: On the face of it, the establishment of the committee with its representation from the Eastern health board and various other interested parties seemed a good idea. However, many people, myself included, ask why the committee's remit should have been restricted to the services of these two great hospitals in isolation from other hospitals, particularly those within the Greater Belfast area which also duplicate services that are provided by the two hospitals in the centre.

In terms of fairness, let alone economies of scale, it seems odd in the extreme that not one but three other acute hospitals within 10 miles of Belfast city centre are not included in the current review. I am grateful to the Minister for being present for this debate. First, he should immediately announce a further review of hospital services not just for Greater Belfast but for the whole of Northern Ireland. Until such a review has been completed, no hospital should be considered for closure.

Of course I must deal with reality. Today a proposal, which will shortly be presented to the Minister, suggests that the maternity services of the Jubilee hospital,

[Dr. Hendron]

which is part of the Belfast City hospital trust and the Royal hospitals trust, should be brought together in one unit in three yet-to-be-refurbished floors of the multi-storey tower block of the City hospital. That proposal has attracted almost universal opposition.

I shall make some important facts clear before proceeding further. Both the Royal hospitals trust and the Belfast City hospital trust are committed in principle to the work of James McKenna's committee, but that does not mean blind acceptance of all the proposals, especially those in the most recent document called "Seeking Balance" which has been issued by the committee.

The Royal, for example, with some reluctance, agrees with the proposal to move its renowned breast care clinic, the first in the United Kingdom to receive a charter mark, to a new location in Belfast City hospital. That is because the Royal trust believes that, if Belfast City hospital is to be the cancer centre for Northern Ireland, as appears to be the case, it is better for women to have the breast clinic located there. The Royal trust, however, is unanimous in opposing the proposal, which would close its maternity hospital and move it to the city hospital site.

The Government are on record as having the best interests of the national health service at heart. Understandably, they advocate change, but surely only where change is for the better. They advocate change when clear economies are to be made. Those are worthy ideals, to which we would all subscribe. If the Minister agrees, however, with the proposal from the "Seeking Balance" document about maternity services, he will bring about changes in Belfast which, far from protecting or even enhancing the service, will weaken it and, almost unbelievably, will cost more to provide.

I said earlier that I speak both as a politician and as a family doctor, but let me assure hon. Members that my views are not simply those of a concerned doctor. The opposition to the proposal is echoed by astonished clinicians throughout Northern Ireland and by medical experts throughout the UK. Let me quote some of the things that those learned people have been saying.

The Provincial Paediatric Specialty Group, representing doctors throughout Northern Ireland, said about the proposal:

"It was uniformly agreed that the proposed move would give rise to considerable difficulties in the care of the sick newborn. These babies may require the urgent attention of a range of specialist services and specialised laboratory services. On the site of the Royal Hospitals Trust there is easy access to the specialists and associated facilities. A move of the maternity services in isolation would compromise the care of the sick baby."

The chairman of the division of paediatrics from the Homefirst community unit in Ballymena said:

"Members were amazed and concerned at such a proposal as it was felt there could be no medical justification for it. Movement to Belfast City Hospital would isolate the neonate from the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children. This cannot be in the best interests of the sick baby. The paediatricians in the Northern Health and Social Services Board feel that the proposed move would be a retrograde step moving from a unified to a split service."

The Craigavon area hospital group trust said:

"Our concern as referring doctors, to the neo-natal services is that they should have cardiac, surgical, neurosurgical, nephrology or ophthalmology requirements and that there is no unnecessary delay in obtaining those for the neonates."

All those services are available only within the Royal hospitals trust.

Erne hospital in Enniskillen said:

"In any redeployment of facilities for caring for small acutely ill babies, it is most important to so arrange affairs that all necessary facilities are available within one unit".

As I said, in Northern Ireland, those facilities are available only in the Royal hospitals trust.

The paediatric sub-committee of the area medical advisory committee of the Eastern Health and Social Services Board said:

"The Sub-committee is of the view that there are clear disadvantages to this proposal for the management of babies requiring multiple specialist input. The Sub-committee can see no advantage to babies being treated on the Belfast City Hospital site. The proposal is in conflict with guidance from the British Paediatric Association and the British Association of Perinatal Medicine. There is no support for this move by any body of paediatrician in Belfast or anywhere in Northern Ireland. The committee unanimously recommend that the Regional Neonatal Service remains at the Royal site in close proximity to all specialist paediatric services available only at the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children."

The National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting for Northern Ireland said:

"The National Board is strongly of the view that maternity, neonatology and children's services should be on the same site, as a significant number of neonates require the services of the Sick Children's Hospital within the first days of life."

The paediatricians at the Ulster, North Down and Ards hospitals trust said:

"We are concerned at the proposal that the Regional Neo-natal Services should now move to the Tower Block at the Belfast City Hospital. It has been our understanding over the years as clinicians that to provide the best such service it has been important and will remain important to have our regional neo-natal and paediatric system specialists on the same site to most efficiently meet the complex needs of these babies. To separate the neo-natal service to the Belfast City Hospital would clearly be a clinically poorer service than the present excellent one."

The Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children is in close proximity to the neo-natal unit and the Royal maternity hospital. Its staff said:

"The proposals to dislocate the relationship between the tertiary maternity and neo-natal services from the paediatric specialties and the regional cardiac and neurosurgical services on the Royal Hospitals site receives no support. To rearrange these services so that they are separated not only by physical distance, but also by the busiest dual carriageway in the province is almost certainly going to reduce the quality of the service available to newborn babies and will result in delayed diagnosis and treatment and consequent increases in morbidity and mortality."

The staff of the Royal maternity hospital said:

"It is envisaged that all the facilities for a regional service can be provided within the present Royal Maternity Hospital. 'Seeking Balance' proposes the removal of obstetrics, gynaecology and neonatology from the Royal site. We submit that firstly the quality of care to the women and the babies of Belfast and Northern Ireland cannot but deteriorate as a result of this move and secondly, facilities can be provided on the Royal site to enable the highest quality of effective care to be maintained."

The Western Health and Social Services board in Londonderry said:

"We consider it clinically inappropriate given the regional nature of some of the maternity/neonatal provision that this should be separated from related back-up facilities such as the paediatric surgical component. We find the proposal surprising given the recent significant refurbishments which there have been at the Royal Maternity Hospital. Amalgamation on the Royal Maternity site could be achieved more quickly and at significantly less cost."

One clinical difficulty related to the use of the tower block option is that there would inevitably be greater time delays for mothers arriving in advanced labour or with emergency difficulties and who need emergency clinical assessment. That is currently coped with easily in the layout that exists at the Royal maternity hospital, but it is likely to be much more difficult to achieve where a maternity unit is placed on three floors of the tower block.

I want to make a few important points, to which I know that the Minister will pay particular attention. There are about 50 calls per month by paediatric specialists to sick babies in the neonatal unit of the Royal maternity hospital. The Jubilee maternity hospital refers 15 babies per year to the neonatal unit of the Royal and, in addition to that, there are about 70 to 80 babies a year from throughout Northern Ireland. It does not take minutes, which is what it says in the McKenna report, to transfer a baby from the Jubilee to the Royal—it takes three quarters of an hour from the moment a decision is taken to transfer a baby until it arrives at the Royal.

Targeting social need is an important part of Government policy. The Secretary of State refers to the policy of targeting social need being implemented in areas such as north and west Belfast—areas of great deprivation. The Royal group of hospitals is the biggest employer in west Belfast. Therefore, to threaten its future is gross and rank hypocrisy.

Opposition to the proposal to close or transfer the Royal maternity hospital comes from all staff levels in the Royal, including midwives, nurses and consultants as well as from trade unions and the West Belfast health monitoring committee. The people of the Protestant Shankill road and of the Catholic Falls road, as well as the hon. Member for Belfast, North (Mr. Walker), are totally against the closure of the Royal maternity hospital.

I could add many more quotations, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I could tell you about the tens of thousands of people throughout the city and the rest of Northern Ireland who have signed petitions against the proposal. I could tell you about communities united as never before in the joint aim of protecting and maintaining the best possible clinical service for mothers and babies.

In the national health service beyond Northern Ireland, health authorities throughout the United Kingdom have been unanimous in saying that where possible they would wish to provide paediatric and maternity services side by side on one site. In Belfast, within the Royal hospitals trust, that sought-after arrangement already exists, yet it is under threat from a committee set up by the Minister and the Department of Health and Social Services.

There is another aspect to the ludicrous and ill-conceived proposal to move maternity services from the Royal into the Belfast city hospital tower block—that of finance. The Belfast city hospital is a modern building less than 10 years old, yet because of its design, if all the maternity services from the Jubilee maternity hospital and the Royal maternity hospital had to be accommodated within its floors, as the McKenna committee proposes, alterations costing £5 million to £6 million, which could not be completed until the year 2000 at the earliest, would have to be made. It is claimed that the relocated services would then have a 25-year life span.

However, the Royal maternity hospital, although admittedly the building is 60 years old, was designed to handle up to 7,000 deliveries a year, and already houses Northern Ireland's superb regional neonatal unit, which is known not only the length and breadth of Ireland but far beyond. The unit was opened recently at a cost of about £2 million, has more theatres than are envisaged in the relocation to the city hospital, and could easily and swiftly be adapted to take all the services currently at the Jubilee, at much lower cost.

Indeed, to give the Royal maternity hospital the same 25-year life span believed possible at the Belfast city hospital would cost about £4 million—£2 million less than the current proposal at the city hospital will cost. That does not include the savings that could be made almost immediately because the Royal maternity option would quickly be brought into operation, whereas the proposal involving the city hospital tower could not be implemented until the year 2000 at the earliest.

I admit that I am no economist, but it seems to me that to reject the idea of spending £4 million to enhance a service that is already of high quality, with high standards and a unique and comprehensive range of services, in favour of spending £6 million on a proposal that will offer services that are less accessible and of a lower standard, simply does not make sense. So why is the proposal before the Minister?

The answer is now clear. The object of the acute hospitals project in this case is to utilise fully Belfast city hospital's tower block. I have no hang-up about that; indeed, as a young doctor I worked in the city hospital myself. The Royal hospitals trust has no hang-up about it either, but it has offered Dr. McKenna other more sensible options, which so far all seem to have been rejected. The document "Seeking Balance" does not seem to have sought far enough.

There are strongly held views that the three floors thought necessary to accommodate the maternity services will not be available in the tower from the year 2000. But even if they were likely to be available, no Government and no department of the civil service, no one faced with possible appearances before the Public Accounts Committee, could accept a proposal to commit millions of pounds to what is clearly a contentious recommendation, without serious in-depth investment appraisals being carried out by independent experts.

That would mean that all the options would have to be fully considered, not simply the one proposal about to be put before the Minister. There are at least three other options, which must be fully financially explored.

The first option is to concentrate all the Royal maternity hospital and Jubilee hospital services in the tower of the Belfast city hospital. The second is to leave the services as they are. The third is to look at the maternity services provided by all the hospitals in the Belfast area before making a decision. The final option—the most obvious and sensible one in the circumstances—is to relocate the services from the Jubilee hospital to the Royal maternity hospital site. Without such an appraisal, no Government could possibly approve action that, in the long run, could result in millions of pounds being spent unwisely.

History is often strange. In the case of the maternity services in Belfast area, it is not just strange but bizarre. Just before the trusts were launched in Northern Ireland, the Eastern health and social services board was trying to find ways of saving money. The board produced a number of reports that offered various options as to how services should best be provided within the tight finances that the board expected to be available in the coming years.

[Dr. Hendron]

One plan produced by the board was to centralise maternity services in the Greater Belfast area. Bearing in mind the then regional strategy, the proximity of the children's hospital to the Royal maternity hospital and various other factors, which hospital found itself faced with a closure plan? It was the Jubilee, and of course there was a massive campaign to keep that hospital open. But that was the recommendation that was made to the Government. Barely three years later, the same board—having failed to bring about the closure of the Jubilee hospital in pre-trust days—is one of the key players in the McKenna committee that produced the proposal to move all maternity services into the Belfast city hospital. Isn't that amazing?

Let me sum up. The document "Seeking Balance", produced by the acute hospitals reorganisation project, wants to move maternity services from the Jubilee maternity hospital and the Royal maternity hospital and relocate them in the upper three storeys of a multi-storey tower block. This proposal is against all the best clinical opinion, which supports the provision of maternity and paediatric services on the same site as is currently provided on the Royal hospital site. The proposal to relocate at the Belfast city hospital will cost a minimum of £6 million, whereas centralisation at the Royal maternity hospital will cost at most £4 million—a saving of £2 million. No financial appraisals have been made of this contentious proposal, and clearly there must be a thorough investigation of all possible options.

The Minister should reject this illogical, ill-conceived and insensitive proposal concerning maternity services. The Department of Health should carry out a thorough review of all hospital services throughout Northern Ireland and, in addition, obtain proper investment appraisals of all other possible options for maternity services other than those currently outlined in the document "Seeking Balance". These will conclude that the only sensible way to provide and to protect these most necessary services is to have them located within the Royal maternity hospital, which is only a few minutes walk from the internationally acclaimed services of the other three hospitals within the Royal trust.

Were the Government to do anything less, they would be ignoring the best options for women and babies. Surely no Minister and no Government would want to compromise these essential services.

10.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Malcolm Moss): I congratulate the hon. Member for Belfast, West (Dr. Hendron) on his good fortune in securing the debate. I commend him for his choice of subject and for the clear manner in which he has set out his concerns and those of his constituents about the current proposals by the acute hospitals reorganisation project for the rationalisation of maternity services between the Belfast City Hospital trust and the Royal Group of Hospitals trust.

I want to make it clear at the outset that the proposal for maternity services has not been made in isolation. It is one of a large number of proposals for 28 specialties that have been put forward by the reorganisation project and not, I wish to make it clear, by my Department. Because those proposals are so closely interrelated, they can be considered properly only as a complete package.

The proposal on maternity services was one of 16 contained in the third project paper, "Seeking Balance", on which consultation finished on 5 April. The project's steering group is at present considering the responses that it received and, in the light of those, will put a final set of recommendations before me for consideration. At that stage, I shall wait to consult further, as I did in relation to the second paper, "A Singular Service". At the end of that process, it will be my responsibility to make the final decisions.

I assure the hon. Gentleman that I shall do so as quickly as possible, to remove the uncertainty at both trusts, but not before I have had time to hear and consider fully all the arguments from both sides of this important and emotive issue. I want to emphasise that, whatever my final decisions, the future of the two trusts will not be put in any doubt by the absence of a maternity unit, either in clinical terms or in terms of income.

The Belfast city hospital tower is one of the most modern hospitals in the United Kingdom, and will continue to be a key asset for many years to come. The Government have recently agreed an investment of approximately £65 million for the reconstruction of the Royal Victoria hospital. That is in addition to expenditure of more than £20 million in the Royal Group in the past five years. There could hardly be clearer evidence of our commitment to both those much admired and loved hospitals.

As a prerequisite to discussion of any of the proposals, it is necessary to understand how and why they came about in the first place. We started back in November 1993 when, after extensive consultation over almost two years, the Eastern health and social services board produced its "Strategy for General (Acute) Hospital Services". In the section of the document that focused on maternity services, the board set down its view that one maternity unit in central Belfast could provide the required services both for the local population, and, in terms of specialist services, for the wider board area and Northern Ireland as a whole. The board also commented on the significant support for the concept of one maternity unit in central Belfast that it found during the consultation process.

The board's strategy was then considered by my predecessor, Baroness Denton, and in announcing her decisions in March 1994, she welcomed the fact that not only the board but

"both Trusts recognise the need for rationalisation and are willing to play their part in achieving this".

She then asked Dr. James McKenna, then the chief medical officer, to move from that post and lead a steering group on rationalisation.

For the record, the remit of the acute hospitals reorganisation project, as it came to be known, is

"to develop and oversee the implementation of a coherent strategy for the reorganisation of services at the RGH Trust and the BCH Trust to provide a sound basis for their future development"—

this is a key point—

"having regard to services presently located at other hospitals in the Greater Belfast Area where relevant".

To take up the hon. Gentleman's point about the wider remit, I think that there is still within the original remit for the reorganisation project the wherewithal to move beyond the two hospitals, where that is relevant.

It is important to note that the chief executive and clinical director of the RGH and the BCH trusts are members of the steering group.

I want to deal with some of the hon. Gentleman's more specific points in the very limited time that he has left me to respond. If I do not cover all his points, I shall write to him and I shall be issuing a press release to the *Andersonstown News*.

The group's second paper, "A Singular Service", was issued for consultation in mid-1995 and contained proposals for 12 specialties. That paper, too, gained public and professional support and, following further consultation on my part, I endorsed the recommendations at the beginning of this year.

Simultaneously with my announcement on "A Singular Service", the steering group issued for consultation the "Seeking Balance" document, which contains proposals not only for maternity services but for 15 other specialties. It sets out the majority view of the steering group, that maternity services, including gynaecology and neonatology, should be provided in the Belfast city hospital tower rather than the Royal Group of Hospitals site. I do not intend to comment this evening on the pros or cons of that recommendation. It would be wrong for me to do so at this time, as I expect to be asked by the group to consider its final recommendation, whatever it may be, and to make a decision on the issue. I can, however, make some general comments on the matter.

The view that only one consultant-led maternity unit is required in central Belfast was, as I said, first expressed by the Eastern board in its acute hospital strategy, and was subsequently endorsed by my predecessor, Baroness Denton. There was clear evidence of strong support for the concept during the consultation on the board's strategy. The physical inadequacies of both the present units, the Royal maternity hospital and the Jubilee, were pointed out by the hon. Gentleman.

The hon. Gentleman also asked me about the need for an option appraisal. I agree that the financial aspect of the proposal is important, and I would not pretend otherwise. The demand for health services outstrips the supply of money available and there must be a continuous search for greater efficiency, to ensure that the maximum benefit is derived from existing resources. I give him an undertaking that there will be a need for an option—

The motion having been made at Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at half-past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 10 May 1996

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Orders of the Day

Noise Bill

As amended (in the Standing Committee), considered.

New clause 1

AUTHORISED OFFICERS

'A local authority shall by resolution identify officers who are to be authorised to act on their behalf in relation to all matters contained herein.'.—*[Mr. Thomason.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

9.34 am

Mr. Roy Thomason (Bromsgrove): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 35, in clause 8, page 4, line 30, leave out

'who is authorised for the purposes of this section.'.

Mr. Thomason: I want at the outset to make it clear that I am not opposing the spirit of the Bill, which I support. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Greenway) on introducing such an important Bill, and we are grateful to him for the time that he has spent both on its preparation and on its passage through the House.

There are one or two questions around the periphery of the Bill that need clarification, either today or later in another place. One of those questions is the subject of my new clause. If I catch your eye later, Madam Deputy Speaker—perhaps on Third Reading—I want to raise other matters, such as the practicalities of enforcement, right of entry and so on.

It is well known that local authority environmental health officers—who will no doubt be responsible for enforcing the Bill—are usually properly authorised by their local authorities. The Bill is important—it gives significant powers to local authorities—and that importance and significance should be acknowledged within local authorities. It would not be appropriate to say to the junior office boy or office girl, "Off you go on your bicycle or in your car and deal with that noise nuisance." That would not treat the issue with the significance it deserves.

Enforcement will require properly qualified officers who know how to deal with the public and who are used to handling potentially sensitive and even explosive issues. We all know that problems with noise often involve neighbour disputes, which can put the public peace at risk if they are not handled sensitively and correctly. It is essential that local authorities instruct appropriate officers with the necessary qualifications, not least to handle the proper equipment to measure noise.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (Colchester, North): I share my hon. Friend's view about the general intentions behind the Bill, and join in his congratulations to our hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Greenway).

The point being made by my hon. Friend ignores the fact that the vast majority of local authorities already employ officers to deal with noise nuisance. I have letters from the two local authorities in my constituency—Tendring district council and Colchester borough council—each stating that it has an environmental community services department and a director of environmental and technical services. Those authorities are already dealing with the issue of noise.

The Bill is about giving additional powers to those who are already coping with the terrible problems in people's neighbourhoods; it is not about setting up new departments, which might be an unnecessary expense. Can my hon. Friend reassure me that his new clause will not require local authorities to go to the expense of setting up new departments?

Mr. Thomason: I am delighted to give that assurance to my hon. Friend. There is absolutely no reason why a local authority should set up a new department. However, we are all aware that, on occasion, local authorities want to extend their bureaucratic empires, and also that any piece of legislation is capable of being construed in a way that we would find unsatisfactory. Whether or not the new clause includes a specific authority is irrelevant to that point, although my hon. Friend is right to say that none of us should expect new departments to be created.

I said earlier that I anticipated that enforcement would be the responsibility of local authority environmental health officers. I stand to be corrected if others have different views, but I think that they are the appropriate officers.

I well remember from my days in local government that, when we appointed an environmental health officer, it was usual for the council to pass a resolution authorising an officer to deal with a whole variety of statutory powers and duties that were imposed on or could be undertaken by the local authority. I am merely suggesting that, when the Bill becomes an Act, its powers should be added to the list requiring resolutions.

In other words, a specific authority should be given to the environmental health officer, so that, in conducting their duties, he or she can say to members of the public that they are authorised persons and not any odd bod recruited by the local authority, that an appropriate resolution has been passed giving them the authority to deal with the matters, that they have such authority by virtue of the position they occupy, and that the local authority has considered the matter sufficiently grave and weighty to note that they are suitable persons to undertake the responsibilities.

The purpose of my new clause is not to create new empires or lead to local government taking on new employees, but simply to ensure that the matter is treated

[Mr. Thomason]

with the importance it deserves and that officers have the protection of being able to refer to an appropriate council resolution to show that they are statutorily authorised to deal with noise nuisance.

Amendment No. 35 is a technical adjustment, which, consequent on the adoption of the new clause, would change the drafting of the Bill. I invite the House to endorse the new clause.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment (Mr. James Clappison): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Mr. Thomason) for his contribution to the debate. If I may anticipate the response of my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Greenway), I should like to make one or two points.

I appreciate that the spirit in which my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove has tabled his new clause and amendment is entirely supportive of the Bill's aims. I understand his concerns about local authority personnel, and I am conscious that he speaks with great experience and some distinction on local authority matters. Although the Government will of course carefully consider his points, I have something of a presumption against the amendments at the moment, because I am concerned about the effect that they would have on the operations of local authorities.

The amendments would largely override the useful power available to a local authority to make arrangements for the exercise of its functions under section 101 of the Local Government Act 1972. That section allows a local authority to arrange for the discharge of any of its functions by a committee, a sub-committee or an officer of the authority. It further provides that such a committee may, in effect, further delegate any functions to a sub-committee or officer of the authority.

As I have said, I am concerned that the amendment and the new clause would override that power. For example, under clause 2(1), the amendments would mean that the only person who could investigate complaints would be a person who was named by a resolution of the full council. That could give rise to operational difficulties and practicalities, particularly if the authorised person named by the resolution of the full council was not available. I am sure that we can all envisage certain circumstances in which it might be difficult—if not impossible—to hold a meeting of the full council to pass a necessary resolution if the named person were not available.

I understand the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Hastings and Rye): Is there misapprehension about the new clause and the Local Government Act to which my hon. Friend has referred? I get the impression that the Local Government Act specifies an official by name rather than by function. I get the impression from the new clause that my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove is talking about specifying officers by function. If officers are specified by function, and we are talking about an environmental health department, more than one person would be involved. It would therefore make it much easier on a busy, hot Saturday night, when there were many calls on environmental health officers, to be able to deal with problems. The new clause may make it easier for a council rather than more difficult.

9.45 am

Mr. Clappison: I appreciate my hon. Friend's intervention. As I said, I am prepared to reflect on the matter, but as it stands, I am concerned that the amendments might make the provisions more inflexible by restricting the operation of the powers to local authority officers who had been named by the resolution of the full council.

In the event of such an officer being unavailable, it would be regrettable if the exercise of the powers were constrained, and the Bill's intention thereby defeated. I am certainly prepared to consider the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove has made. As he said, it may be possible to consider the matter with a view to dealing with it another place.

Mr. Thomason: Only a limited number of environmental health officers, technicians or whoever, would be able to operate the noise equipment. Such equipment is quite expensive, and I am sure that most local authorities would not be happy if someone who was not trained had an opportunity to fiddle with the buttons and possibly damage it. Since only a limited number of people are qualified to use it, those authorised to do so are quite a narrow band. If, unfortunately, nobody qualified were available, the local authority would probably not be able to conduct an inquiry anyway.

Mr. Clappison: My hon. Friend makes an entirely reasonable point, and speaks, as I said, with great experience of local authorities. My concern is to make the provision as flexible and effective as possible for local authorities. That is the way in which I shall approach the new clause.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove made an important point about the identity of the person exercising the power when people were being investigated, particularly where powers are being exercised regarding entry and seizure under clause 10. It is important that the identity of the person exercising the power should be known. I draw my hon. Friend's attention to clause 10(3), which meets concerns about identification of persons exercising the power by requiring the person entering a property and seizing any equipment to produce the authority if required to do so. I hope that that sets to rest any concerns that my hon. Friend might have.

I appreciate the points made, and if my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove were to consider withdrawing his amendments, I would reflect further on them—without, of course, giving any guarantee that any further amendments would necessarily result.

Mr. Harry Greenway (Ealing, North): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Mr. Thomason) for his most kind remarks; they are much appreciated.

I too think that the amendments are extremely important. It is very important that it should be clearly established that anyone operating any equipment by which people may be found guilty of a criminal offence should be properly qualified to do so, and that the equipment should be properly checked, guaranteed against a check

sheet and efficient at the time of use. I understand that the very fact that we are saying so today in the House will help in any possible litigation in this area.

It is no good saying that the equipment was checked a year ago and that it was all right then, as has been said in one or two speeding cases. That cannot be right. The equipment clearly has to be right, or injustice could be done. The House is about avoiding such injustice, to ensure as far as possible justice for the citizens of this country. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister, who has said that he will reflect on the matter, supports what I say.

The intention of the new clause is not absolutely clear, although what my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove said was important. The meaning of the word "identify" is not entirely clear, as I read it. As I understand it—I am sure that my hon. Friend will correct me if I am wrong—the new clause would require each local authority in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to pass a resolution identifying the officers who were authorised to carry out the provisions on its behalf.

Personnel change all the time, so if an identification procedure was established, it would have to be updated regularly. There would be a serious possibility of dangerous slippage. If we accepted the new clause, we might create new bureaucracy, which we should seek to avoid. I think that my hon. Friend and I would, philosophically, oppose more bureaucracy.

I am sure that all hon. Members are aware that there will be occasions when, such are the demands on the noise complaints service of a local authority, an environmental health officer may have to be seconded from another area. That is a problem to watch. Anyone coming in from another area to undertake such work would have to be thoroughly competent.

The Bill lays a duty on local authorities to ensure that suitable people are appointed to the task. My remarks, and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove and the Minister, have underlined that point. If people are not competent, there will be a clear defence in a case brought under the Act, as I hope and believe the Bill will become. That point must be covered carefully.

I do not believe that the new clause would add to the effectiveness of the Bill, because of its lack of absolute clarity. My hon. Friend the Minister has said that he will reflect on the matter. I cannot make a commitment, but I believe that what my hon. Friend has said is important.

Mr. Jenkin: Our big anxiety about the Bill, however desirable it is, is the cost and complexity of implementation. One of my local authorities, Tendring district council, has written to me pointing out that the obligation under clause 2 to take "reasonable steps to investigate" all complaints between 11 pm and 7 am would require the current voluntary out-of-hours emergency-only service to be replaced by a formal standby service staffed by paid officers.

If the paid officers must be people who have been nominated in a resolution passed by the full council, as proposed in the new clause, many people will have to be invested with powers under the Bill. Do we seriously imagine that, in managing a comprehensive service throughout the night every night, all the people involved will be expert in operating the noise-measuring equipment? Would it not be better for local authorities to have more flexibility?

If there is sickness or holiday absence, different people will be on standby duty attempting to fulfil the obligations. Councils may operate a system whereby they call out the experts after officers have visited the scene of a complaint. After a preliminary investigation, they may then call out the experts with the noise-measuring equipment. This is a complicated area, and local authorities will want to gain operational experience before deciding how to deploy their resources.

The new clause would further complicate matters—I share the anxieties expressed by my hon. Friend the Minister—and we should pause before accepting it. When the Bill is considered in the other place, as I hope it will be, the matter will be further discussed, and further representations from local authorities may be heard.

Mr. Thomason: In view of the comments made this morning, and especially in view of my hon. Friend the Minister's undertaking to look at the matter in more detail, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion and clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 1

ADOPTION OF THESE PROVISIONS BY LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Mr. David Evennett (Erith and Crayford): I beg to move amendment No. 1, in page 1, leave out lines 6 to 18.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Janet Fookes): With this, it will be convenient to discuss also the following: No. 2, in page 1, line 6, after 'authority', insert—

'(a) if the local authority are the authority for an area which is a preponderantly urban area and have been so prescribed, or

(b) in the case of any authority not so prescribed.'.

No. 5, in clause 2, page 2, line 18, at end insert—

'( ) Where a local authority receive a complaint under subsection (2) and the offending dwelling is within the area of another local authority, the first local authority may act under this group of sections as if the offending dwelling were within their area, and accordingly may so act whether or not this group of sections applies to the area of the other local authority'.

Mr. Evennett: I am delighted to be able to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Greenway) on promoting the Bill and successfully furthering it in Committee—a Committee on which I was pleased to serve. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Minister for all the time and effort he has given, not only in Committee but in discussions with many of us, including discussions on the amendment. I also pay tribute to the Secretary of State for the Environment, the Department and hon. Friends who served on the Committee, including my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mr. Merchant) who gave such stalwart service in developing ideas to deal with the problem.

Tremendous work has been done to deal with the problem of noisy neighbours and noise nuisance. The Bill is the culmination of many years of work, which has brought together many different people who have

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suggested ways in which to deal with a growing problem. Noise nuisance, especially the problem of noisy and inconsiderate neighbours, is the scourge of modern life. It is a particular problem in urban areas, but it is not limited to them.

Over the past decade, my borough, the London borough of Bexley, has seen a tremendous increase in noise problems. Thamesmead, an exciting new development with new people and a new environment, is part of my constituency. Thamesmead contains a variety of properties, ranging from skyscraper tower blocks to small dwellings. There has been an increase in the number of people living close together, and thus an increased density of population. With that has come an increase in the problem of noisy neighbours. Modern properties are closer together than older ones and walls are thinner, which means that noise travels further and causes even more distress for our residents.

As my hon. Friend the Minister will know from our discussions in Committee, my reason for moving the amendment is not just the loud noise from music, which was highlighted in Committee and in discussions we had with my hon. Friend privately. Noise problems are also caused by do-it-yourself experts who work on home improvements very late at night or early in the morning so that they can finish the job. That is a problem that affects people across the country. Loud televisions and radios are also a problem.

I know that my hon. Friend the Minister agrees that we had successful and good-humoured discussions in Committee, with contributions from Conservative and Opposition Members expressing all shades of opinion. We were constructive, and the amendments were an attempt to improve the Bill, which is a good one, but which needs more work.

My proposal in Committee that on-the-spot fines should go up from £40 to £100 met unanimous approval. Although I welcome the increase in on-the-spot fines, the general thrust of the Bill and the determination of the Committee and my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North to make it effective, I believe that we have not gone quite far enough. That is way I have moved the amendment.

If, after all the hours that we have spent not only in the House and in Committee but in discussions with outside organisations, including local authorities, which my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, North (Mr. Jenkin) mentioned, the Bill is not implemented, we shall have wasted our time, and many hopes will be dashed. Good intentions are not enough. The remaining problems need to be addressed. The principles are excellent and the provisions are good, but implementation causes me some concern, which is why I tabled my amendment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North has drafted a good Bill, but it has one flaw, which I want to emphasise again. My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham emphasised it in Committee, and we cannot emphasise it enough.

Local authorities will be allowed to opt in to the provisions. That is all very well, and I hope they will, but I am worried that many will not, especially in the urban areas, where the problem is greatest and where the number of noisy neighbours is growing. More and more of my constituents and those of my hon. Friends are suffering disturbed nights because of inconsiderate neighbours.

10 am

Local authorities will have the power to opt in, and they may do so. I certainly hope that my local borough of Bexley will. In Greater London and the other metropolitan districts, it is essential that authorities opt in. I have been campaigning for a change in the law for five years, with many colleagues from both sides of the House and with outside organisations such as the Right to Peace and Quiet Campaign, located in my constituency and run by Val Gibson, which has also campaigned effectively for five years.

We do not want local authorities to give excuses for not being able to implement the Bill, or indeed to give any reason, such as not being able to afford it. We have been greatly helped by other campaigning groups and by the editor and journalists of *The Mail on Sunday*, who have been champions of the cause. Thousands of people from all over the country have written to me saying that they want their local authorities to take action.

In Committee, we managed to extend the Bill to Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) cannot be with us today, but he was vociferous in Committee, and keen that the Bill should be implemented in Belfast, just as in London and in the other metropolitan districts in England and Wales. But if the Bill is not mandatory, local authorities, especially the crucial ones in London and other metropolitan areas, may not implement the measure.

Mrs. Bridget Prentice (Lewisham, East): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that four out of five environmental health officers believe that many local authorities will not implement the Bill if it is not mandatory—I sympathise with everything that the hon. Gentleman has said so far—and does not the fact that the officers themselves think that local authorities will find excuses not to implement make the amendment all the more necessary?

Mr. Evennett: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. She represents a borough in Greater London, and knows the problems only too well. She is right to say that many environmental health officers think that the Bill will not be implemented unless we toughen it and make action compulsory. I share that view, and endorse her comments.

I believe that the public will be bitterly disappointed if, after all the campaigning that we have done, including the campaign by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North in the *Evening Standard* to get people on board, we do not achieve what we set out to do.

In Committee, the Minister was happy with the Bill as it stood. My hon. Friend promised that there would be a campaign to ensure that his borough implemented the measure, and I remember a graphic description—the vision has stayed with me—of my hon. Friend marching up Ealing High street with the protesters, demanding that his local council implement the Bill. Knowing what a champion he is of his constituents, and how effective he is in the local community, I think that he may be

successful—but others may be less so, and may not be able to persuade their councils to do what we want them to do and implement the Bill.

Mr. Harry Greenway: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I shall come back to that subject, but at this point may I simply say how powerful I think a local campaign can be? When, in 1987, the Labour council in Ealing put up the rates by 65 per cent., I led thousands of people through the streets to protest against that wicked rates increase, and I held a mass meeting on Ealing common, also with thousands of people. The council could do nothing. We swept the Labour councillors from power. We said, "Labour out," and they were out.

Mr. Evennett: I thank my hon. Friend for that little hint of what may be in his forthcoming memoirs. When he writes them, that will be an important chapter, and we look forward to reading the book—but not for many years yet, because we want him to continue campaigning from the Government Benches, supporting the Government and going from strength to strength.

I am afraid that that was a little digression, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I wanted to highlight my hon. Friend's determination to campaign to get his council to implement the Bill. I am sure that we shall all campaign to persuade our local authorities to do the same, but how successful we will be is a moot point. We may be successful in certain areas, but there will be other areas in which, through no fault of the campaigners, the authorities will not implement it.

That is why I tabled my amendment. I am passionate in my desire to see the Bill come into operation.

Mr. Thomason *rose—*

Mr. Evennett: Does my hon. Friend want to intervene?

Mr. Thomason: No, but I would like to speak when my hon. Friend has finished.

Mr. Evennett: My hon. Friends are enthusiastic about speaking to my amendment, and I am grateful for that.

I do not want to detain the House too long, because I know that other people are waiting to speak; indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Mr. Thomason) can hardly wait to participate and give the House the benefit of his experience.

We are looking to my hon. Friend the Minister to make some additional proposals to ensure that the Bill is implemented. My amendments may be defective, or there may be other reasons why neither my hon. Friend the Minister nor my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North can accept them, but in Committee both my hon. Friends agreed to take the matter away and think about it again.

It was discussed at length in Committee, and at that time both my hon. Friends were satisfied with the Bill. I think that they must have had more faith in the local authorities than I did—indeed, more faith than the environmental health officers have.

Mrs. Lait: In Committee, my hon. Friend was successful in increasing the fixed penalty to £100. Has he done any costings that can tell us whether the money would cover the extra costs to an environmental health department, thus removing the argument about the Bill imposing extra costs on local authorities?

Mr. Evennett: I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent intervention. We have looked at the figures, but it is difficult to assess the implications. Whether local authorities would be allowed to keep the proceeds from the fines is another question. Certainly that could be a way forward, which the Minister could explore to try to help local authorities to meet the additional costs of implementing the Bill.

I have had the privilege of having discussions not only with my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North but with the Minister and the Secretary of State—who is very sympathetic to and supportive of the Bill. They agreed that they would re-examine that matter, and I look forward with interest to their comments today, because, to reiterate, thousands of people across the country have suffered for far too long.

We have campaigned and achieved this excellent Bill, but it is still one step away from being a really great Bill that will solve the problems. It is a good Bill, but it needs improvement. If it is not improved, we will have raised people's hopes and expectations only to dash them, and many more people will continue to suffer the problems, agonies, anxieties and illnesses caused by lack of sleep and distress from extra noise.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister can present measures to overcome the implementation problem. A good Bill that is not implemented is a waste of time, because it will not do what it needs to do and what we want it to do. There is a great deal of concern about the problem. The hon. Member for Lewisham, East (Mrs. Prentice) has highlighted what environmental health officers think about it. Many local councillors feel the same way about it, and many people who have campaigned on noise nuisance feel that the Bill as drafted is insufficient.

I hope that the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North will examine sympathetically the issues that have been raised in Committee and again today, so that the Bill can be improved and made more effective, so that it gives some respite to people who have suffered for so long from the effects of noisy neighbours.

Mr. Jenkin: I speak against the amendment, with deference and apologies to my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Crayford (Mr. Evennett), who spoke eloquently in favour of it. The amendment, in fact, transforms the Bill into something completely different.

The Bill is an admirable effort to increase local authorities' powers—to give them discretion, to decentralise, to enhance their autonomy and to allow them decide for themselves what action should be appropriate in their areas.

One lesson that the House should have learnt over the past 20 or 30 years is that the endless stream of obligations that have been placed on local authorities, combined with the very necessary and ever tighter fiscal and financial constraints placed on them, have a detrimental effect on the esteem with which they are held and the effectiveness with which they are accountable to their electors. The more local authorities have become proxies for national Government and for Parliament, to do

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our bidding, the less spontaneity and genuine democracy there has been at local authority level. This amendment turns a Bill that confers greater powers on local authorities into one that confers greater obligations on local authorities.

We need only consider community care, for example, in which we turned all the activities of local authorities into prescriptive obligations. There is a question whether that has left local authorities with sufficient discretion to decide how to distribute to best effect the substantial resources they have available for community care. They find that they have to follow certain procedures and categorise certain people in certain ways. This measure is falling into the same trap.

Hon. Members should take a step back and stop being a great regulatory machine, churning out the obligations that we tend to churn out. When, as in this case, we can do so, we should devolve power and discretion to local authorities so that, advised by their electors, they can decide for themselves what is appropriate, what they can afford and what are their priorities. Those matters must be decided locally.

If hon. Members think that we are more capable of deciding what local authorities' priorities should be, we are falling down a very dangerous and slippery slope. We have found it necessary to do that in a great many spheres, but this is surely not one of them, because every local authority will have its own demography, geography, distribution of housing and priorities.

Although I share the determination of my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Crayford that hon. Members should ride valiantly to the rescue of our oppressed constituents—I have had my share of complaints from constituents complaining about noisy neighbours and dealing with their problems—

Mr. Evennett: I am interested in my hon. Friend's comments, but does not he agree that this is really a national and a growing problem? A tremendous number of people are suffering across the country from noisy neighbours, and subsequently from illness. Expenditure has to be increased on the health service because people have terrible illnesses resulting from noise. The problem is not only local: it is a problem of our society.

10.15 am

Mr. Jenkin: Of course it is a problem of our society. It is a problem of an ever more egocentric culture—of members of the "me generation" blaring their music to the detriment of everyone else. But my hon. Friend is employing the type of arguments that the European Commission would use to suggest that it is a Europewide problem—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps we should have a European directive to deal with noise across Europe, because of those little villages on the Belgian and French borders, for example. Noise knows no national boundaries: no doubt that is what we will be told.

The point, of course, is that, while there may be a national, European or even world malaise about selfishness and noise, the problems we are talking about are desperately local, affecting a few houses in one street or one block of flats. To describe the problem as one that requires nationally prescriptive legislation is really rather stretching the point. I think that we should not, in this case, put another obligation and another expense on local authorities, when it is not an obligation or expense that they would choose for themselves. As often as we can, we should draw back from such legislation.

Perhaps we should be considering spheres in which we can deregulate local authorities. This is not a regulatory measure as currently drafted, but, with the amendment of my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Crayford, it will immediately become a regulatory burden on local authorities. Therefore, I hope that the House will reject the amendment.

Sir Michael Neubert (Romford): I support amendment No. 2, in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Crayford (Mr. Evennett). I should mention that I, too, put my signature to the amendment, but that has somehow eluded those making up the Order Paper. I also have considerable sympathy with my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, North (Mr. Jenkin), as I shall explain a little later.

But first I should like to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Greenway) for his commendable initiative in introducing the Bill and for his sterling efforts in promoting it. As one of its sponsors, I am very happy to be associated with him in this campaign.

My sympathy with the Bill's objectives goes back many years—to the very beginning of my political activity, 35 or 40 years ago—when I was a member of the then Noise Abatement Society, which was founded by a great man, John Connell. Its slogan was "QP", which stood for "Quiet, Please". I have always believed that that is a right to which people are entitled and that it should be preserved as far as humanly possible in our increasingly urban environment. That is why I am strongly sympathetic to the amendment. Unless some effort is made to allay people's natural concerns, the Bill's provisions will not be implemented.

I think that all hon. Members have received a briefing from the National Society for Clean Air and Environmental Protection. This organisation is not known to me, but it has undertaken a poll of local authority officers to gauge their initial response to Government proposals for a new noise offence. The survey showed that only a minority of authorities are likely to adopt the new powers proposed in the Bill, and that even fewer are in favour of the fixed penalty provisions.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Crayford (Mr. Evennett) said, people would be gravely disappointed if, having had their hopes raised by the Bill's passage through Parliament, at the end of the day—or perhaps during the night—its powers were not used to effect the necessary social objective.

Those of us with a local authority background—I was leader of the council and mayor of the borough of Bromley—

Mr. Piers Merchant (Beckenham): A fine man.

Sir Michael Neubert: There speaks a parliamentary representative of the borough of Bromley; I am delighted to have his commendation.

We understand that there are many calls on local authority resources. The opportunity for authorities to use their discretion is extremely limited, and I have some

sympathy with the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, North (Mr. Jenkin). There are only limited spheres in which local councils have the opportunity to decide their own priorities, but there is anxiety that, in the sphere of noise abatement, they will on occasion take the easy way out.

Common sense dictates that dealing with the problem of excessive noise is not an enviable task for anyone, designated or not. By definition, people who cause excessive noise to the annoyance of their neighbours are likely to be anti-social and, when tackled, to be aggressive. Assaults may follow, so the amendment would impose a very unenviable task on local government.

I hope, however, that the Minister can reassure us that the proposed powers stand a good chance of being exercised. If not, the House is conducting an empty exercise. I believe that that is the concern that prompted the amendment, which I am happy to support.

Mr. Thomason: I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Crayford (Mr. Evennett) for introducing an important debate that goes to the nub of the Bill. I am also grateful to him for offering to give way to me when I did not want to intervene—I hope that he will continue that practice.

I should like in passing to mention an issue touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Crayford, which is referred to more specifically in one of the associated amendments. There is some difference between urban and rural authorities in respect of the problems of noise.

It is certainly true that, where a large number of people live close together, one can expect greater problems, including the generation of noise. However, with the exception of those who live in total isolation in the countryside, the problems of noise are every bit as great in rural as in urban areas. In fact, they may sometimes be greater, because the very peace and quiet of villages and small communities means that any noise is more noticeable and disturbing. The problem of noise is not confined to urban areas but pervades almost the whole country.

Mr. Jenkin: I represent a constituency that is both urban and rural. Its two local authorities cover deeply rural areas as well as intensely urban areas—one authority covers Colchester, and Tendring district includes Clacton. I find the distinction between rural and urban authorities rather spurious, because very few local authorities cover wholly rural areas. We must remember that every local authority has an urban element, and that every authority is different. It is therefore wrong for a Bill to try to treat them the same.

Mr. Thomason: My hon. Friend is right, and makes my point powerfully.

Mr. Evennett: I cannot agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, North (Mr. Jenkin). I have been concerned with the problems of noisy neighbours for many years. There has been a fantastic increase in metropolitan areas in the difficulties and illnesses caused by noise problems. Very few such cases have arisen in rural areas, or in the mixed areas to which my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, North referred. The majority of cases involving the breakdown of health and complaints of distress are in the Greater London area and the metropolitan urban districts.

Mr. Thomason: I cannot comment on the content of my hon. Friend's mailbag, but mine also contains complaints of the type that we have been debating. The problem is not confined to metropolitan areas, or even urban areas. I represent a semi-urban constituency not entirely dissimilar to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, North, and I am very aware of the harrowing experiences of a number of constituents.

The core of the debate on the amendment is whether an obligation should be placed on local authorities to implement the Bill's provisions, or whether it should be left to their discretion. I do not agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Crayford or his surprising ally, the hon. Member for Lewisham, East (Mrs. Prentice). It is amazing that the Labour party, which is supposed to espouse the cause of local authority autonomy, should now be saying that it wishes to remove local discretion and oblige local authorities to introduce the Bill's provisions.

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: Let us assume for a moment that there is some difference between urban and rural areas. A street may be divided, with one side is covered by one local authority and the other side by another. Would there not be great injustice for the residents if one authority implemented the Bill's provisions and the other did not? Residents on one side of the street would have to suffer noise because their authority was not prepared to do anything about it.

Mr. Thomason: It depends on one's views, but there is great injustice for those who live in a street, one side of which is controlled by Wandsworth and the other Lambeth. What is the point of having local authorities if they cannot make some decisions? If they do not have any decision-making powers, we shall end up with total uniformity. Although it is necessary in the national interest to impose on local authorities certain standards—and spending limitations—authorities must be able to make decisions on matters affecting their communities.

If councillors in a particular authority perceive that there is a noise problem in their area, they should be able to respond to it under the Bill. If the neighbouring council feels that there is no noise problem or that it has other more important spending priorities, it must be able to act appropriately, which will mean not introducing the Bill's provisions.

It is entirely desirable that such matters are left to a local authority's discretion, and that councillors are able to respond to the views of their electorate. After all, councils are democratically elected institutions, and must respond to the views of the people who put them in office. Their responsibilities include environmental issues, which means dealing with noise. For us to sit here and pontificate and say that councils must implement the provisions would override the discretion that local authorities should often, quite properly, have.

My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, North referred to the expense involved in introducing the provisions. I do not regard it as such a worrying issue as he does, but I acknowledge that there will be some

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expense for local government. It is right that councils should decide whether they can afford to implement the provisions of the Bill. It is matter that ties in with their budget priorities and overall financial position.

The question is whether we believe that local government ought to have discretion in these matters, and whether local councillors should be able to respond to the wishes of their electorate on noise nuisance. The issue of local democracy and local discretion makes this debate important, and I hope that it will be considered carefully by my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary. The Government should not be seduced by the persuasive arguments of those who support the amendment into acknowledging its validity. Local discretion should take priority, and the Bill as drafted is correct in this respect.

10.30 am

Mr. Merchant: The riposte to the argument ably outlined by hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Mr. Thomason) comes from those people who write to their Members of Parliament to complain that they are unable to get their local authority to take the action that they could take under the present law. That is the problem. This House must protect the rights of individuals, but we must also protect the rights of local authorities—including their autonomy—that they understandably wish to preserve. I am no opponent of that, but the arguments must be balanced, and one sometimes must take precedence.

Only yesterday, I received a letter from a constituent, Mrs. McCrory of Copers Cope road, Beckenham, in which she outlined the terrible problems she has had with noise from her neighbours. This has been going on for some months, and I was aware of the problem, which has not yet been resolved. She wrote that she was getting no response at all from the police and no response "from E. Heath." This puzzled me somewhat, until I realised that this was an error in her writing. She was not referring to my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath) but to E. Health, the local authority's department of environmental health, which was responsible for upholding the law.

It is a nightmare that members of the public feel that their local authority is not protecting them and is not using the powers to enable them to live in peace. Those people are having their lives upturned by irresponsible and antisocial neighbours.

Mr. Jenkin: Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be misleading of us to suggest to the public that this Bill might cut noise at a stroke?

Mr. Merchant: There is wisdom in what my hon. Friend says—he is obviously following a good master. No supporter of the Bill believes that, as the Bill's purpose is to reduce the problems that the public are facing in some areas.

My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, North (Mr. Jenkin) referred to local authorities. In theory, I should like local authorities to have the freedom to decide on the issues dealt with in the Bill. It would be good to give them powers and then let them have the freedom to choose whether to exercise them. That, after all, would further empower local authorities by devolving powers to them. It would enable the legislation to be flexible, and would ensure that judgments were made at a local level where that was most applicable.

I do not automatically support the amendment, but I am in favour of local authorities retaining the ultimate decision-making power. We must look at the link between the views of individuals and those of local authorities, which, in practical terms, is often very tenuous. Voters do not necessarily express their feelings on individual local issues when it comes to local authority elections, as the events of the past few days have shown. In the vast majority of cases, voters do not vote in support of one particular issue.

A more effective way of achieving local consensus would be via a mechanism of which I am in favour, but which I accept is not fashionable—a local referendum. I would like many of the decisions that are particularly relevant to local people—for example, Sunday trading—to be settled at a local level by a referendum, which would accurately match the policy for an area with the views of local people. I merely float that as an idea, although I accept that there is at present insufficient support for it.

One recalcitrant authority failing to use the powers that the Bill will give it would completely neuter the decision of this House. What would we say to constituents who said, "We have a terrible problem with noise. We looked to you, as our elected representative acting through the House of Commons, to bring in a law to protect us. You have done that, yet it has had no impact, because our local authority has decided not to implement it"?

I hope that my local authority will use the powers—I have no reason to believe that it will not—but I can give no guarantee to the House or to my constituents that the Bromley authority will use the powers that the Bill will give it. I give as an example the powers that local authorities have to defend leaseholders by giving them support in actions taken through the courts against unreasonable freeholders. The local authority can exercise that power, but my authority decided not to, despite the fact that Bromley has one of the largest concentrations of leaseholders in one constituency—and probably in any one borough—in the country. That is an example of the powers that Parliament has given a local authority not being used.

For all those reasons, and because of the balance between the two sets of arguments, the amendment greatly appeals to me. I welcome the fact that my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Crayford (Mr. Evennett) has given this House an opportunity to have what will be the most important debate on Report.

I should be happy with a compromise. If the entire wording of the amendment is not acceptable, the Government could make it compulsory for some local authorities to exercise the powers. I believe that a distinction can be made between highly urban authorities and rural areas; I do not agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, North that no distinction could be drawn between them. I believe that such a distinction can be clearly drawn.

Sir Michael Neubert: May I express my support for my hon. Friend's comments? He will know the intense nuisance that can be caused by noise in an urban environment. He, of course, comes from the leafy avenues

of Beckenham, but in the area of London where I live, noise is intrusive and does not always come from neighbours. Radio 3 is blotted out at the weekends by, presumably pirate, radio stations blaring out popular rock music. One cannot even escape noise within one's home when listening to the radio.

Mr. Merchant: I agree with my hon. Friend. He prompts me to back up what he said and my previous argument with the fact that my constituency is not all leafy avenues, much though I appreciate the leafy parts of it as well. My constituency is varied. It is interesting that by far the majority of complaints I receive on noise issues come from the part of the constituency in which housing is closer together and there is not the space for leafy avenues.

Leafy avenues themselves dissipate noise. The same volume of noise emanating from one house or flat in areas where the housing is close together will cause a great deal more disturbance than in one of the leafier, more spacious parts of the constituency. It is simply a question of the proximity of the housing; it is nothing to do with the people. That is a strong illustration of the difference between urban and rural areas.

If the amendment cannot be accepted and we cannot create a divide between urban and rural areas, I hope that some mechanism can be found to enable voters in an area to express their feelings and take some action if the problem is particularly acute. I hope that some means can be found by which they could require a local authority to institute the requirements of the Bill, or, at the very least, a mechanism to review the working of the Act, to enable the House or the Government to step in and take action if, in the fulness of time, it seems that local authorities are not taking up the power that the Bill will give them.

I do not see the point of the House going to great lengths to perfect a Bill if few local authorities use it. That would be futile. From my own, perhaps slightly selfish, point of view—that is why I was elected to the House—the Bill will be completely useless if my local authority does not act to implement the Bill, even if every other local authority does, because my constituents will not be protected.

I mentioned the letter that I received from Miss McCrory. I should like to quote two other examples among many complaints that I have received in the past few years.

Mr. Geoffrey Munn, who lives in the Upper Norwood part of my constituency—the Crystal Palace area—was driven to distraction by continuous noise from a neighbour. He encountered the same problem as Miss McCrory. The local authority, which is vigilant and tries to tackle noise problems, did not have sufficient energy to pursue the problem. The noisy neighbour was effectively able to outwit the local authority.

I believe that the law as it existed could have been enforced more effectively, but because the law is uncertain and ultimately requires rather unpredictable and expensive legal processes, local authorities are unwilling to press matters to a conclusion. If a noisy neighbour does not take notice of warnings and pressure, local authority environmental health departments will normally lay off. The police similarly take a step back these days and detach themselves from neighbourhood noise problems. Yet, as we all know, noise may be only the beginning of other problems, which can result in much more serious forms of criminal activity.

Where cases of noise are bad, they can be very bad indeed. I do not believe that local authorities would be inundated by complaints from the public. If we make the power compulsory, we will not be burdening local authorities with a massive new responsibility. The rest of my hon. Friend's excellent Bill will act mostly as a deterrent. It will stop noise, and therefore will not require great enforcement resources. By its very existence, the Bill will reduce the problems.

Bad problems do exist. We have a duty to our constituents to do our best to protect them. To leave the Bill uncertain in its impact or leave a question mark over its final implementation is not sufficient. That is what we shall do if we do not amend it. We owe our constituents a greater responsibility than that.

Mr. Harry Greenway: I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me at this stage in the debate on these most interesting and important amendments moved so admirably by my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Crayford (Mr. Evennett), with powerful support from my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Sir M. Neubert), thoughtful opposition from my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, North (Mr. Jenkin), a dramatic intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Mr. Thomason) and a compromise approach by my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mr. Merchant). The compromise approach warms my heart, because I believe that that is the way in which we need to go in response to the amendments.

10.45 am

It would be absurd for my busy colleagues on both sides of the House to have given the time that we have devoted over the years to this important subject and this particular Bill if the Bill was not implemented where it was essential and needful that it be implemented. We need a device in the Bill whereby the Secretary of State can review the situation and see what can be done if local authorities do not implement the Bill where there is a clear and proven need to do so. That is the approach that is needed, instead of writing into the Bill the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Crayford, for the sound reasons given by some of my hon. Friends.

Areas are different. I lived in the country for many years. In some parts of the country, one house is distant from another and noise problems are very different from those in some parts of my constituency and the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Crayford, where people are very close to each other, walls are thin and inconsiderate noise impacts desperately heavily on a neighbour. So it is unthinkable that local authorities such as mine, my hon. Friends' and others across London and in other urban areas will not implement the Act, as we hope and believe it will become. However, to force all local authorities to implement the Bill where it was not needed would be mistaken. That would simply put people through a bureaucratic process.

Therefore, I look forward to an amendment in the House of Lords, which my hon. Friend the Minister will develop in his speech, which will be a compromise. It will

[Mr. Harry Greenway]

be written into the Act that there will be a review after two years of how the Act is being implemented and that there will be a trigger to ensure that it is implemented if it is not implemented where it should be. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Crayford can accept that and that on that basis he will feel able to withdraw his amendments. I give him that assurance.

In some urban areas, one in 10 homes suffer severe noise. That is desperate. It is as serious as that. We cannot just sit back. My hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Crayford certainly is not. I pay tribute to his determination to ensure that the measures that we are all so keen on are implemented, effective and properly policed and enforced. I believe that they would be effectively enforced under the compromise that I have suggested, which was also the approach of my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham, whom I thank for his interesting speech.

My amendment No. 5 states:

"Where a local authority receive a complaint under subsection (2) and the offending dwelling is within the area of another local authority, the first authority may act under this group of sections as if the offending dwelling were within their area, and accordingly may so act whether or not this group of sections applies to the area of the other local authority".

The amendment meets the point made by the hon. Member for Lewisham, East (Mrs. Prentice), to which my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove referred with such clear force. It deals with cases where the complainant's and offender's dwellings are in different local authority areas. Where the complainant's local authority has adopted the night noise offence, it may take action against the offender regardless of whether the offender's local authority has adopted the provisions. It is a crucial amendment.

Many streets are bisected by local authority boundaries. As the hon. Member for Lewisham, East said, one side of a street can be in a different authority from the other; even one property may be in a different local authority from its neighbour. I am sure that we all agree that local authorities that adopt the night noise offence should be capable of taking action when their residents complain. I say in parenthesis that that would not apply to other matters such as council tax. The good people of Wandsworth may be assured that they will not be damaged by the dreadful Labour local authority of Lambeth or face any danger of paying a council tax four times their present one. The figure may be even higher, for all that I know.

My amendment seeks to ensure that, where the noise maker's dwelling is in a different local authority from that of the complainant, the complainant's local authority can take action regardless of whether the noise maker's authority has adopted the night noise offence. Hon. Members may like to know that, where such cases are brought and result in prosecution, the magistrates court involved will be the one that has jurisdiction in the area in which the offender's dwelling is situated.

Mrs. Lait: It gives me great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Greenway), for two reasons. First, I add my congratulations on his skill in moving a Bill that is very necessary to many of my constituents. Secondly, he mentioned his amendment, on which I wish to make a few remarks.

First, in respect of the Bill's principles, I support its original text and the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, North (Mr. Jenkin). Many local authorities will wish to implement the legislation. I am sure that my local council in Hastings will. If it does not, I, like my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North, will be out demonstrating along with hundreds of people who have made complaints about noise—which, I have to say, usually come from council house tenants. I doubt whether Rother, which is the other local council that my constituency covers, would wish to implement the legislation.

I strongly believe that it should be up to the local authority to make the decision and to respond to the needs of its voters. We have been attacked for years for taking powers away from local authorities and being prescriptive about their roles and duties. It is about time that we started to give back to local authorities many of the local duties that their residents consider to be their responsibilities.

To digress briefly, I refer to the prescriptive powers that we gave environmental health officers on food and the necessary further action that we have taken to deregulate, to allow them to govern with a much lighter hand. The Bill embodies the practice of allowing environmental health officers to use their discretion, which I support. I hope that any compromise that my hon. Friend the Member Ealing, North and my hon. Friend the Minister reach will ensure that local authorities have the primary responsibility for deciding whether to implement the Bill.

I also ask my hon. Friend the Minister whether any costings have been done on the value to local authorities of the £100 fixed penalty, to find whether it would cover costs, which would encourage many local authorities to implement the legislation. While that may not be a financial incentive, it would not cost them any money. That would help to ensure that the legislation was implemented where it was most needed.

I support amendment No. 5 because, as I said earlier, my constituency covers two local authorities and I can envisage a situation where noise is a nuisance and the local authority involved has decided to do nothing about it. We must be able to take powers to ensure that the people who live in that unfortunate situation, whether between Wandsworth and Lambeth or between Hastings and Rother, can take action to end the disturbance. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North for including that provision.

On pressure to implement the Bill, the amendment of my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Crayford (Mr. Evennett) deletes the requirement for local authorities to advertise in a newspaper the fact that they will be implementing the legislation. I hope that in another place we can pluralise that, so that as many people as possible have access to that information.

Mr. Thomason: I tabled amendments to that effect. Does my hon. Friend accept that many district council areas are served by more than one local newspaper and that the reference to one newspaper circulating in the area is misleading? It may be appropriate in another place to consider giving local authorities an obligation to advertise in the local newspapers that reach the majority of their residents.

Mrs. Lait: I commend my hon. Friend for bringing out that point. I rather pirated his amendment for my

comments. It is important that as many people as possible are apprised of the fact that local authorities have such powers on noise. I would go further, because of the growing number of licences for community radio. That would be a most appropriate channel for local authorities to use, to advertise their powers on noise. It would be a slur on community radio to suggest that it is so loud that it would be appropriate for action to be taken.

Mr. Evennett: Then people would have to turn the volume up.

Mrs. Lait: The volume would need to be turned down.

In another place, it may be possible to consider bringing that provision into line with the modern, diverse media service in our constituencies. I hope that the Minister can take up some of my points about making implementation easier, while ensuring that we do not impose an unwanted and costly burden of regulation on local authorities.

Mr. Clappison: This has been a good debate on an important amendment. I am alive to the concerns expressed by my hon. Friends, which in some cases reflected at least two different strands of thinking—giving local authorities the discretion to decide what is important for their residents and giving those who have suffered from noise the fullest possible protection. I am alive to the fact that there are those two different approaches and hope that I shall be able to suggest a balanced way of meeting both concerns.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mr. Merchant) was right to refer to the need for some balance. He came down strongly in favour of giving the fullest possible protection. To some extent, my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Greenway) has paved the way for what I want to say. I think that I shall be able to suggest an approach that meets both those lines of thinking.

11 am

I am grateful for the kind and generous comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Crayford (Mr. Evennett), but the credit for choosing this subject for a private Member's Bill has to go to my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North, who has performed his role as promoter with some distinction and who took the Bill through Committee with some skill.

I was about to say that my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Crayford has been one of the loudest proponents of the Bill, but perhaps I should not do so. It would be fair to say that he has been one of the most active and interested sponsors of the Bill. He has certainly taken to heart the problem of noise, and I know that the Right to Peace and Quiet Campaign, run by Mrs. Val Gibson, is located in his constituency. He has spoken of the problems that noise has caused there. Truly, my hon. Friend has campaigned fully and energetically on behalf of his constituents, that campaign and all those who have suffered from the problem and contacted him.

The starting point of my response must be the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Sir M. Neubert), who also speaks from a position of great experience in this matter and with the benefit of his previous association with the Noise Abatement Society. He said that he wanted the powers to be exercised where help was needed. That is a helpful approach. The Government certainly share that view.

Indeed, I am sure that we are all concerned that the remedies of the Bill should be available where they are needed and can be effectively operated. We considered that in some detail in Committee and I listened to the concerns expressed by hon. Friends who are present today, including the my hon. Friends the Members for Beckenham and for Erith and Crayford, among others. They spoke with some considerable passion on the subject.

In approaching those concerns, I feel that it would be helpful if I dealt first with the two amendments, which are, in large measure, exclusive. Amendment No. 1 would apply the offence to all local authorities, while amendment No. 2 gives the Secretary of State the power to prescribe the "preponderantly urban" authorities where the new offence would operate, leaving those not prescribed to adopt it if they so wished.

I have argued that local authorities are in the best position to judge whether they need the additional power to deal with night noise problems from domestic premises. I have been conscious of the arguments in support of that approach. I have thought carefully about the matter, the point of view that the fullest possible protection should be given and the concern about whether local authorities will adopt the measure.

Amendment No. 1 would be too general in its application. Local authorities must give some thought to whether the measure is required in their area. There may be local authorities which, having considered the matter thoughtfully and carefully, as all hon. Members would wish them to do—they have mentioned the clarion calls that they will give authorities in their areas—will adopt the measure. Others may come to the conclusion, after careful consideration, that there is little demand for a night-time noise complaints service in their area. A blanket application of the measure would be wrong, as it would be wrong to impose it on authorities that had concluded that it was not required in their area.

I listened to what hon. Members said about the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health. My previous comments are fortified by the view expressed when that organisation wrote to me, saying that it supported the provision of the new offence, but only if it were made discretionary, as it believed that

"it must be up to individual local authorities to tailor their noise service in accordance with the needs of the community."

Having considered that view and being mindful of the position of local authorities that may conclude that they do not require the noise complaints service and of the public expenditure implications—I am also mindful of the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, North (Mr. Jenkin) about the general applications, which was certainly germane—I cannot support the approach of amendment No. 1. I am, however, sympathetic to the concerns expressed, particularly those so strongly put forward by hon. Friends who represent urban and metropolitan areas. I agree with those who say that there may well be a distinction with regard to the offence and that the new measure will be needed in such areas as they are the most likely to suffer from that type of problem.

My hon. Friends the Members for Erith and Crayford, for Hastings and Rye (Mrs. Lait) and for Ealing, North will be at the head of the queue trying to force local authorities to take into account the needs of their local

[Mr. Clappison]

residents and to adopt the service. Sadly, as we all know and as we heard in Committee, local authorities of certain complexions have not always listened to the views put forward by local residents. I recognise that, in tabling amendment No. 2, hon. Members want to find a way of focusing on the authorities that are likely to have most need of the new offence. I am sympathetic and I support the idea of maintaining the adoptive approach, but with power to bring in the offence in some areas.

We are talking of a novel approach to the night noise problem. Never before have we sought to fix an objective standard in law as the basis for a noise nuisance offence. It is right that we should see how the new approach works in practice before deciding to impose it on any authorities. I have some doubts, therefore, as to whether amendment No. 2 is exactly right. It will be a couple of years before we know just how well the new offence works in practice and how useful an additional weapon it is in the hands of local authorities, and before the Government should consider overriding local judgment.

Furthermore, I am unsure whether the drafting of the amendment is sufficiently clear. There may be problems with the interpretation of "preponderantly urban". My hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Crayford is doing himself an injustice, as he has made a noble attempt at drafting, but there may be some problems. For example, there is the question whether the whole of the local authority area has to be predominantly urban, or just a part. I am alive to the concerns expressed by my hon. Friend—concerns shared by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North—and in particular those about urban and metropolitan areas. In the light of the debate today and in Committee, I can suggest an alternative approach, which I hope will deal with the problems that they mentioned.

As I have said, I have a lot of sympathy for my hon. Friends' objective in proposing amendment No. 2. I give them an undertaking that the Government will review the workings and take-up of the new noise offence after it has been operating for two years. At that stage, we shall be able to see the effect that the introduction of the new offence has had and whether its coverage should be extended. If the weight of opinion is that the new offence should be applied more widely, I can see a case for requiring local authorities to take up the new powers.

I should prefer to wait and see what the review brings, but I recognise the strength of hon. Members' views today. I am conscious that we cannot be sure that in two years' time a suitable legislative vehicle will be available for the sort of amendment that may be necessary—that is always a problem, and I know that my hon. Friends will be thinking of that. I confirm that we would, therefore, accept an amendment in another place to add to the Bill a reserve power, to allow the Secretary of State to direct local authorities to take up the new offence.

Mr. Thomason: Would that occur by regulation requiring an affirmative resolution in the House, or would it involve another procedure?

Mr. Clappison: My hon. Friend will have to wait and see what the regulations bring. We want the Secretary of State to have the reserve power to direct local authorities, as I have said. I shall consider the point that my hon. Friend made as to the form that that regulation should take.

Amendment No. 2 is not satisfactory and we cannot accept it as it stands. I am concerned that, if it is carried, it will cause more difficulties than it solves. Nevertheless, we are supportive of the aim of amendment No. 2, so I have suggested a workable alternative that will allow the objective of hon. Members to be achieved simply and effectively. In the light of that undertaking, I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Crayford will reflect and consider withdrawing his amendment.

Amendment No. 5 was tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North. I accept the amendment, as it is helpful. Hon. Members may be interested to know that section 81(2) of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 makes a similar provision with regard to cases of statutory nuisance. It is right that a local authority that adopts the new offence should be able to take action against noise coming from dwellings over its border. That is a sensible amendment and I have no hesitation in accepting it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye asked for details about the costings of the proceeds of fines and fixed penalties. The fixed penalty will be a substitute for a fine in court, which will affect the destination of the fixed penalty. I shall write to her and give her the details of the costings. I am sure that she understands that her question requires some research and analysis.

Mr. Thomason: Is it not true that the fixed penalty that is collected, or any other fine under the provisions, will go to the Treasury in the normal way? However, because the Treasury coffers will be slightly replenished from those sources, would it not be appropriate for my hon. Friend and his colleagues in the Department of the Environment to argue with the Treasury that the revenue support grant should be adjusted slightly, to take into account the extra costs and responsibilities that the local authorities might face?

Mr. Clappison: My hon. Friend will know that many interesting discussions take place between my Department, other Departments and the Treasury. I am sure that in any such discussions we shall have the opportunity to bring my hon. Friend's comments to the Treasury's attention. I cannot anticipate the form that the regulations will take—I cannot anticipate decisions that may be made later.

Mr. Evennett: I thank the Minister for his comments on the amendments. This has been an excellent debate, and hon. Members have placed varying degrees of emphasis on the issue, even though we all want to achieve the same thing. Many hon. Members will watch closely, to see whether councils implement the legislation when it is on the statute book, I hope in July. I have had discussions with the Minister, the Secretary of State and the promoter of the Bill, and I welcome the Bill. I look forward to seeing an amendment tabled in another place that deals with the concerns of my amendment No. 2.

I thank the Minister for the serious way in which he approached the problem, particularly for urban areas. In the light of what he said, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 2

INVESTIGATION OF COMPLAINTS OF NOISE FROM A DWELLING AT NIGHT

Amendment made: No. 5, in page 2, line 18, at end insert—

'( ) Where a local authority receive a complaint under subsection (2) and the offending dwelling is within the area of another local authority, the first local authority may act under this group of sections as if the offending dwelling were within their area, and accordingly may so act whether or not this group of sections applies to the area of the other local authority'.—[*Mr. Harry Greenway.*]

Clause 8

FIXED PENALTY NOTICES

11.15 am

Mr. Harry Greenway: I beg to move amendment No. 6, in page 4, line 33, leave out 'group of sections' and insert 'Act'.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Janet Fookes): With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 7, in clause 11, page 6, line 45, leave out subsection (1).

No. 8, in page 7, line 18, leave out 'Regulations, or'.

No. 9, in page 7, line 18, leave out 'this Act' and insert 'section 9'.

No. 10, in page 7, line 20, leave out 'regulations or'.

No. 11, in clause 14, page 8, line 11, leave out 'regulations or'.

No. 12, in page 8, line 14, leave out 'regulations or'.

No. 13, in page 8, line 28, leave out sub–paragraph (h)(iv) and (v) and insert—

'( ) in the Schedule, paragraph 1(b)(ii) and the word "and" immediately before it,

( ) in the Schedule, in paragraph 1(c), the words "or section 81(3) of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 (as so extended)"'.

No. 14, in schedule, page 9, line 5, leave out sub–paragraph (a).

No. 15, in page 9, line 13, leave out 'so extended' and insert

'extended by section 10(7) of this Act'.

No. 16, in page 9, line 17, at end insert—

'conferred by section 10(2) of this Act or section 81(3) of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 (as so extended),

( ) "related equipment", in relation to any conviction of or proceedings for a noise offence, means seized equipment used or alleged to have been used in the commission of the offence,

( ) "responsible local authority", in relation to seized equipment, means the local authority by or on whose behalf the equipment was seized'.

No. 17, in page 9, line 21, leave out from 'if' to 'until' in line 22 and insert

'it is related equipment in proceedings for a noise offence instituted within that period against any person'.

No. 18, in page 9, line 29, leave out 'that noise' and insert

'the noise in respect of which the fixed penalty notice was given'.

No. 19, in page 9, line 32, leave out sub–paragraphs (3) to (5).

No. 20, in page 9, line 42, leave out from 'person' to end of line 46 and insert

'is convicted of a noise offence'.

No. 21, in page 9, line 47, leave out 'that' and insert 'any related'.

No. 22, in page 10, line 14, leave out from 'than' to 'make' in line 15 and insert

'the person in whose case the forfeiture order was made'.

No. 23, in page 10, line 25, at end insert—

'( ) Where the responsible local authority is of the opinion that the person in whose case the forfeiture order was made is not the owner of the equipment, it must take reasonable steps to bring to the attention of persons who may be entitled to do so their right to make an application under sub–paragraph (1)'.

No. 24, in page 10, line 30, leave out sub–paragraphs (5) and (6) and insert—

'(6) If on the expiry of the period of six months beginning with the date on which a forfeiture order was made in respect of the equipment no order has been made under sub–paragraph (1), the responsible local authority may dispose of the equipment.

Return etc of seized equipment

5. If in proceedings for a noise offence no order for forfeiture of related equipment is made, the court (whether or not a person is convicted of the offence) may give such directions as to the return, retention, or disposal of the equipment by the responsible local authority as it thinks fit.

6.—(1) Where in the case of any seized equipment no proceedings in which it is related equipment are begun within the period mentioned in paragraph 2(1)(a)—

(a) the responsible local authority must return the equipment to any person who—

(i) appears to them to be the owner of the equipment, and

(ii) makes a claim for the return of the equipment within the period mentioned in sub–paragraph (2), and

(b) if no such person makes such a claim within that period, the responsible local authority may dispose of the equipment.

(2) The period referred to in sub–paragraph (1)(a)(ii) is the period of six months beginning with the expiry of the period mentioned in paragraph 2(1)(a).

(3) The responsible local authority must take reasonable steps to bring to the attention of persons who may be entitled to do so their right to make such a claim.

(4) Subject to sub–paragraph (6), the responsible local authority is not required to return any seized equipment under sub–paragraph (1)(a) until the person making the claim has paid any such reasonable charges for the seizure, removal and retention of the equipment as the authority may demand.

(5) If—

(a) equipment is sold in pursuance of—

(i) paragraph 4(6),

(ii) directions under paragraph 5, or

(iii) this paragraph, and

(b) before the expiration of the period of one year beginning with the date on which the equipment is sold any person satisfies the responsible local authority that at the time of its sale he was the owner of the equipment,

the authority is to pay him any sum by which any proceeds of sale exceed any such reasonable charges for the seizure, removal or retention of the equipment as the authority may demand.

(6) The responsible local authority cannot demand charges from any person under sub–paragraph (4) or (5) who they are satisfied did not know, and had no reason to suspect, that the equipment was likely to be used in the emission of noise exceeding the level determined under section 5'.

Mr. Greenway: As I explained in Committee on 3 April, I am aware of the need to look at the schedule

[Mr. Greenway]

again, because of the need to ensure that third party rights are taken into account. I understand that the Finance and Leasing Association—which represents companies that provide consumer finance in the form of hire, hire purchase and personal loans—is happy with the revised schedule. I believe it important that I put that on the record.

My amendments require local authorities to take reasonable steps to find the owner of seized equipment where a forfeiture order has been made against someone other than that person. The local authority may dispose of equipment when six months have elapsed after a forfeiture order has been made. The amendments also provide for the return of equipment where proceedings are not undertaken and for the right for local authorities, in certain circumstances, to return equipment only on payment of charges.

The amendments clarify a number of issues relating to the retention, forfeiture and return of seized noise-making equipment, and, in cases where the equipment is sold, the proceeds of sale. I am aware that concerns have been expressed about cases where the owner of the equipment is not aware of its use in the creation of excessive noise. The amendments will help to ensure that the owner is made aware of the fact that his equipment has been seized, and they give him the opportunity to reclaim it.

Amendment No. 23 requires the local authority—where a forfeiture order has been made on someone other than the owner of the equipment—to take reasonable steps to trace the owner, to notify him of his rights to reclaim the equipment. Amendment No. 24 includes a provision to enable the local authority to dispose of the seized equipment six months after a forfeiture order has been made if no claim has been made on it. The amendment ensures that, for up to one year after sale, claims can be made by the owner of the equipment against the proceeds of sale.

The amendment also provides, at subparagraph (5) of the revised schedule, for where there are proceedings and no forfeiture order is made. In those circumstances, the court will be able to give directions as to the return, retention or disposal of the equipment. In cases where equipment has been seized but no proceedings for a noise offence are taken within 28 days, sub-paragraph (6) of the revised schedule will provide that the local authority must return the equipment to any person whom it is satisfied is the owner of the equipment and who makes a claim within six months of the expiry of that period. The local authority will be required to take reasonable steps to find the owner of the equipment, but if no claim is made, it will be able to dispose of the equipment.

Under paragraph 6(4) and (6) of the revised schedule, a local authority, which must return seized equipment under the terms of that schedule, can retain that equipment until the reasonable charges for its seizure, removal and retention are paid. However, a local authority may not charge if the owner did not know or had no reason to suspect that the equipment was likely to be used in the noise offence.

Paragraphs 6(5) and (6) enable the owner of the seized equipment that is being sold by the local authority to claim proceeds of the sale, which must be made within one year of the sale. If a local authority is satisfied that the person is the owner, it will pay him any sum by which the proceeds of the sale exceed the costs incurred by the local authority. If the local authority is satisfied that the owner did not know that the equipment was likely to be used in the commission of a noise offence, it cannot demand charges.

The other amendments in the group, which make minor changes to the schedule, will assist local authorities in their procedures for seizure of equipment. I hope that hon. Members on both sides will recognise that the amendments will help to establish an effective procedure for the seizure and return of equipment.

It is absolutely essential that the procedure we introduce is one that local authorities can implement easily and also provides protection for the owners of equipment used in the commission of an offence without their knowledge.

Mr. Thomason: Can my hon. Friend explain the purpose of amendment No. 7, which deletes clause 11(1), which refers to regulations and prescriptions? It is my understanding that a number of powers are still conferred under the Bill, even as it is now amended, on the Secretary of State. Can my hon. Friend explain the wisdom of deleting clause 11(1)?

Mr. Greenway: Amendment No. 7 relates to amendment No. 2, moved by my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Crayford (Mr. Evennett). Once that amendment had been withdrawn, it was necessary for me to move amendments Nos. 7 to 12 to ensure that proper protection was offered.

Mr. Clappison: I support these sensible amendments, which protect the rights of third parties.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Mr. Thomason) asked an interesting question. He has obviously paid great attention to the Bill and has great interest in procedural matters. I am sure that he would not want the amendments to be defeated. He should bear in mind the important point that they provide additional protection for the rights of third parties—innocent owners of equipment, who, in certain circumstances, may have had their equipment used to cause the type of noise offence specified in the Bill. In those circumstances, the owner would lose his property. The combined effect of the amendments safeguards their rights. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove will rush to his feet to support them.

Mr. Thomason: I was merely expressing concern about the technicality of deleting clause 11(1). I was not in any way attacking the rest of the amendments, which are right and appropriate. I was concerned that we might delete something that was still needed, but I am happy to accept the assurances given.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendments made: No. 7, in page 6, line 45, leave out subsection (1).

No. 8, in page 7, line 18, leave out 'Regulations, or'.

No. 9, in page 7, line 18, leave out 'this Act' and insert 'section 9'.

No. 10, in page 7, line 20, leave out 'regulations or'.—*[Mr. Harry Greenway.]*

Clause 14

SHORT TITLE, COMMENCEMENT AND EXTENT

Amendments made: No. 11, in page 8, line 11, leave out 'regulations or'.

No. 12, in page 8, line 14, leave out 'regulations or'.

No. 13, in page 8, line 28, leave out sub–paragraph (h)(iv) and (v) and insert—

'( ) in the Schedule, paragraph 1(b)(ii) and the word "and" immediately before it,

( ) in the Schedule, in paragraph 1(c), the words "or section 81(3) of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 (as so extended)"'.—*[Mr. Harry Greenway.]*

Schedule

POWERS IN RELATION TO SEIZED EQUIPMENT

Amendments made: No. 14, in page 9, line 5, leave out sub–paragraph (a).

No. 15, in page 9, line 13, leave out 'so extended' and insert

'extended by section 10(7) of this Act'.

No. 16, in page 9, line 17, at end insert—

'conferred by section 10(2) of this Act or section 81(3) of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 (as so extended),

( ) "related equipment", in relation to any conviction of or proceedings for a noise offence, means seized equipment used or alleged to have been used in the commission of the offence,

( ) "responsible local authority", in relation to seized equipment, means the local authority by or on whose behalf the equipment was seized'.

No. 17, in page 9, line 21, leave out from 'if' to 'until' in line 22 and insert

'it is related equipment in proceedings for a noise offence instituted within that period against any person'.

No. 18, in page 9, line 29, leave out 'that noise' and insert

'the noise in respect of which the fixed penalty notice was given'.

No. 19, in page 9, line 32, leave out sub–paragraphs (3) to (5).

No. 20, in page 9, line 42, leave out from 'person' to end of line 46 and insert

'is convicted of a noise offence'.

No. 21, in page 9, line 47, leave out 'that' and insert 'any related'.

No. 22, in page 10, line 14, leave out from 'than' to 'make' in line 15 and insert

'the person in whose case the forfeiture order was made'.

No. 23, in page 10, line 25, at end insert—

'( ) Where the responsible local authority is of the opinion that the person in whose case the forfeiture order was made is not the owner of the equipment, it must take reasonable steps to bring to the attention of persons who may be entitled to do so their right to make an application under sub–paragraph (1)'.

No. 24, in page 10, line 30, leave out sub–paragraphs (5) and (6) and insert—

'(6) If on the expiry of the period of six months beginning with the date on which a forfeiture order was made in respect of the equipment no order has been made under sub–paragraph (1), the responsible local authority may dispose of the equipment.

Return etc of seized equipment

5. If in proceedings for a noise offence no order for forfeiture of related equipment is made, the court (whether or not a person is convicted of the offence) may give such directions as to the return, retention, or disposal of the equipment by the responsible local authority as it thinks fit.

6.—(1) Where in the case of any seized equipment no proceedings in which it is related equipment are begun within the period mentioned in paragraph 2(1)(a)—

(a) the responsible local authority must return the equipment to any person who—

(i) appears to them to be the owner of the equipment, and

(ii) makes a claim for the return of the equipment within the period mentioned in sub–paragraph (2), and

(b) if no such person makes such a claim within that period, the responsible local authority may dispose of the equipment.

(2) The period referred to in sub–paragraph (1)(a)(ii) is the period of six months beginning with the expiry of the period mentioned in paragraph 2(1)(a).

(3) The responsible local authority must take reasonable steps to bring to the attention of persons who may be entitled to do so their right to make such a claim.

(4) Subject to sub–paragraph (6), the responsible local authority is not required to return any seized equipment under sub–paragraph (1)(a) until the person making the claim has paid any such reasonable charges for the seizure, removal and retention of the equipment as the authority may demand.

(5) If—

(a) equipment is sold in pursuance of—

(i) paragraph 4(6),

(ii) directions under paragraph 5, or

(iii) this paragraph, and

(b) before the expiration of the period of one year beginning with the date on which the equipment is sold any person satisfies the responsible local authority that at the time of its sale he was the owner of the equipment,

the authority is to pay him any sum by which any proceeds of sale exceed any such reasonable charges for the seizure, removal or retention of the equipment as the authority may demand.

(6) The responsible local authority cannot demand charges from any person under sub–paragraph (4) or (5) who they are satisfied did not know, and had no reason to suspect, that the equipment was likely to be used in the emission of noise exceeding the level determined under section 5'.—*[Mr. Harry Greenway.]*

Order for Third Reading read.

11.24 am

Mr. Harry Greenway: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I should like to thank most warmly colleagues on both sides of the House who have taken such a supportive interest in the Bill. I should like to thank the sponsors of the Bill, those who served on its Standing Committee and the Minister for his untiring support and the thought and care he put into the Bill. I should also like to thank the officials from the Department of the Environment and Baroness Gardner, who will take the Bill through another place.

I should like to thank in particular *The Mail on Sunday* for its valuable and important campaign on noise. It highlighted the sheer hell that noise has caused to so many people. It conducted a dogmatic and determined campaign and it was right to insist that something should be done. The *Evening Standard*, with which I campaigned in

[Mr. Harry Greenway]

London, brought equal force to the campaign. Those newspapers have contributed greatly to a much-needed improvement, and I pay a warm tribute to them.

I should also like to thank my researchers, Will McLaren and Peter Davies, for their splendid and special efforts.

The Bill creates a new offence in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to deal with excessive noise at night. It introduces for the first time an objective level against which noise can be assessed. The Bill seeks to provide an additional weapon in the armoury of environmental health officers in the fight against noise nuisance.

So often at my constituency surgeries, I am told of the dreadful and frightening conditions in which people find themselves too afraid to ask their neighbours to turn down the noise that prevents them from getting to sleep at night. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I am grateful for the support of hon. Members, who have obviously heard of such experiences. We are all entitled to proper sleep at night—how can anyone function without it?

The Mail on Sunday and the *Evening Standard* have highlighted stories of elderly ladies having to sit outside in the cold and rain, or to hide in cupboards, to escape the noise of a ghetto blaster being played upstairs or next door. It is alarming that they have had to resort to such extremes because there was no immediate and obvious source of help. That is utterly disgraceful.

At present, local authorities deal with complaints about excessive noise from premises, vehicles, machinery and equipment in the street by using the statutory controls in part III of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, as amended by the Noise and Statutory Nuisance Act 1993. In many cases, those controls are flexible enough to allow local authorities to deal successfully and effectively with widely differing problems of environmental noise—I just wish that some of them would exercise those powers as insistently as they should in all cases.

A growing body of opinion says that domestic noise, which causes such distress and anxiety, calls for swift action. It appeared that the current controls were not adequate. The process can seem excessively long-winded and leave the local authority and the complainant dissatisfied because nothing is really achieved. In a survey carried out by the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health in December 1994, just nine authorities out of 328 surveyed—equivalent to 3 per cent.—operated an immediate response service to complaints about noise. The majority aimed instead to act within a week. There was therefore no proof that an offence had been committed, and it was invariably difficult for a victim of noise nuisance to have any action taken on his or her behalf.

My Bill addresses those issues. Its will make it easier for local authorities to resolve complaints made during night hours quickly and effectively. The Bill provides that a local authority must take reasonable steps to investigate a complaint of excessive noise being emitted from domestic premises during the night hours 11 pm to 7 am. The serving of a warning and, should that be ignored, of a subsequent penalty notice are simple procedures which, in case of failure, are backed by powers of confiscation and court action.

The Bill says:

"If a warning notice has been served in respect of noise emitted from a dwelling, any person who is responsible for noise which—

(a) is emitted from the dwelling . . . specified in the notice, and

(b) exceeds the permitted level, as measured from within the complainant's dwelling,

is guilty of on offence."

The "permitted level" has been set at 35 dB—a figure reached after much research and advice from various quarters.

I believe that the £100 on-the-spot fine will be effective. My first proposal was a £40 fine, but I am sure that we were right to decide, on reflection, that that was insufficient and that the amount should be £100. I am certain that we have strong, widespread support for that figure. It will act as a powerful deterrent to those who are likely to commit noise offences. Once such fines are charged, word will get around quickly and there should be rapid improvement.

When cases go to court, the Bill's approach—of using an objective standard—should make it easier to prove the offence. As I said earlier, we must ensure that equipment used to measure the standard in question is properly calibrated; that is fundamental to civil liberty and fairness. The objective standard that we are setting in the Bill is crucial and new, and will have a powerful effect.

The Bill's simplicity is important. It gives security and greater peace of mind to those who wish to make a complaint and reassures local authorities that might be uncertain of their legal position in regard to prosecuting for noise offences.

Although the Department of the Environment and the Home Office have previously suggested that the Environmental Protection Act 1990 might be used for temporarily removing noise-making equipment, the neighbour noise working party, in its 1995 review, stated that many local authorities are

"uncertain about the legality of using this wide general power for the purpose. There is considerable agreement amongst local authorities, which was shared by the working party, that a specific power to take this kind of action . . . would be useful both as a quick remedy and a deterrent to noise makers."

The Bill therefore gives local authorities the power to seize noise-making equipment used in the emission of noise leading to an offence.

Self-evidently, that is a very effective way of stopping the noise, and I have no doubt that those provisions will be welcomed by local authorities and noise sufferers alike. My amendments to the Bill have provided for a yet better schedule, which details the conditions on, and consequences concerning, an offender's forfeiting his or her noise-making equipment.

The Bill becomes more relevant with each day that passes. On Second Reading, I outlined—with the support and sometimes amusement of colleagues—how the development of dance music, characterised by the heavy bass drum beat, had branched into many forms. Much as I shall continue my efforts to persuade our national pop radio stations to playlist music by the Beatles, I fear that they are little use in the face of the increasing popularity of "jungle", "hard-core" and—I believe—"handbag", which currently prevail. That can be the most intrusive type of music—

Mr. Evennett: Give us a demonstration.

Mr. Greenway: If I did, I might be convicted of noise nuisance.

That can be the most intrusive type of music, and I warn my colleagues that it is no passing trend. I have warned the nation of that.

It is important to recognise the increasing availability, and falling prices, of powerful noise machines. A few tens of pounds can buy an instrument capable of being used at volumes way beyond a comfortable listening level. Previous legislation has tackled the disturbance caused by warehouse parties. It is vital that, in a similar way, we protect individuals from those who wish to throw a party with their powerful hi-fi equipment as the principal guest and centre of attention.

I am most grateful to right hon. and hon. colleagues who have participated in the important, constructive and effective—if occasionally lengthy—discussions held over four sittings of the Standing Committee. Several points were raised, all of which helped to clarify the meaning of the Bill and aided understanding of it.

Most important, I am delighted to remind the House that, following consultation with the Northern Ireland Office, and after much help from the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth)—to whom I am very grateful—the Bill will now extend to England, Wales and Northern Ireland. I am grateful that that is the case, and that many more individuals will be able to use the Noise Bill in their fight against selfish neighbours.

The Committee has amended the Bill to the effect that the penalty notice now costs the offender £100. I emphasise that that is an important adjustment, which will send out the message that such intrusion in the privacy of others is a severe offence, which will be dealt with accordingly. Should the noise persist, an offender will be liable to court fines of £1,000 at a time, and quite possibly the permanent forfeiture of equipment.

I have been asked by some people why the Bill should apply only to night-time noise. It is important to remember that we are attempting to tackle one specific problem at this stage. Daytime noise levels can be higher than night-time levels, but attempts to add provisions relating to daytime noise now might give us too much to do. and there would be a danger of our not achieving the considerable amount that we shall achieve, if we pass the Bill, in tackling night noise.

A start must be made; people are entitled to sleep at night. I am sure that each of us has received numerous complaints from constituents who are upset in some way or other, however great or little, by some form of audible disturbance at night. It is time to put an end to it. Much as I shall miss the hundreds of letters that I receive on the subject, we have an opportunity to do that.

I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House will agree that my Bill will provide important additional powers to tackle this widespread and pernicious problem. I am sure that we all have experience of the adverse effects of domestic noise on the lives and welfare of constituents.

I shall end by quoting a story from *The Mail on Sunday* of Jack Gott, a 59-year-old retired builder, who took his own life in desperation. Night after night, his teenage neighbour entertained guests who played loud pop music, slammed doors and often had violent rows. Those noises were ever present, and he believed that there was only one way of getting away from them. His sister, with whom I am sure we all wholeheartedly agree, said:

"There needs to be a change in the law. Only this will bring justice for the majority against those who just keep on taking liberties."

I commend the Bill to the House.

11.40 am

Mr. Nicholls: The last thing I intend to do is sound a discordant note in a debate of this sort. If I raise a particular point, I shall do so quietly, and, I hope, reasonably.

I join in the praise given to my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Greenway) for the way in which he has introduced the Bill. Those who have come to the subject relatively recently have had to read, in one fell tranche, the proceedings of the Standing Committee and the background briefing documents, all of which show that he has done a tremendous amount of work. Even with the resources from the Department of the Environment, to which he so generously referred, any Back-Bench Member who has introduced such a Bill will realise how much work is entailed.

At times, people may look at our deliberations on the Floor of the House and, when they see only 20 Members present, mistake quantity for quality. They do not realise just how much work has gone on behind the scenes. Therefore, in the one point that I want to raise, I do not wish to be obstructive or destructive. I am certainly not trying to raise the temperature—or the noise level.

I, like other Members of Parliament, have received numerous complaints over the years about the effect of noise on people's lives. I am fortunate that my local council, Teignbridge district council, is efficiently run. No council is perfect, but it is a great deal better than the average. I pay tribute to it because, when I take up complaints with it, it does its level best to solve them—although sometimes without the clear-cut powers that we would want it to have.

As highlighted in the excellent Library briefing on the Bill, what irritates people about noise and drives them to desperation differs to some extent. I remember living in a flat in Hammersmith: at about 4 o'clock every morning, a heavy pounding beat would come from the flat below. As far as I could detect, that song—which was obviously a favourite of the tenants—had only four notes, which never varied. It had the same bass all the time. It was intensely aggravating, the sort of nuisance that could drive people to distraction. Had I been an elderly, frail person confined to my flat, I cannot imagine what I might have done.

However, if what had woken me up at 4 o'clock in the morning was a radio that had been turned up a little too loudly by an elderly, frail pensioner, I might have been irritated, but it would not have driven me round the bend in the same way as that music from the flat below. What was annoying about it was that it was so unreasonable. It was the unreasonable and selfish nature of it that made me so angry.

When someone is annoyed by music in that way, we go much further and begin to imagine the motives of people who have such contempt for those around them that they are prepared to behave in that way. Therefore, it is not just the intensity of the noise that is the problem, but the motives behind it.

What troubles me about the Bill is that I can think of occasions when unreasonable people could use it for their purposes. I can find no reference in the Bill or in the

[Mr. Nicholls]

deliberations in Standing Committee—other than two passing remarks—to, for example, an 18th birthday party. By definition, such a party cannot be justified every day of the week. It is not the sort of party encompassed by the example cited by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North a few moments ago. It is a one-off occasion, which will not happen more than once in a lifetime.

There is no doubt that what constitutes a good night's entertainment for someone celebrating his first and only 18th birthday will not be seen in the same light by elderly neighbours. The last thing I want is for this excellent Bill to be turned into a "Meldrew's manifesto".

I recall a constituent coming to see me to complain about an extremely noisy event. That person had contacted the council, but, because the event had ended, nothing could be done. I looked into the case, and—to cut a long story short—discovered that it had been an 18th birthday party that had continued until about 4 o'clock in the morning, but that was it. It was as bad as that, but no worse.

When I said to my constituent that I had more or less got to the bottom of the problem, and that it was just an 18th birthday party, I heard a tirade about how young people should have more consideration for elderly people who are in bed by 11 o'clock, and that there was no reason why the young people should not be as well.

At times there can be a clash of cultures. Speaking personally, I could not in all conscience say now, in the middle of the day when I am feeling fairly cheerful, that, even on the nights that I want to go to bed at a reasonable hour, as befits someone of my declining years, I would object to my neighbour having a noisy 18th birthday party and say that he was acting unreasonably if that was the only time it was likely to happen.

Mr. Harry Greenway: My hon. Friend is making an extremely important point. Indeed, it was the first question on the Bill raised with me by the sixth form. I said in Committee that, with one-off parties, the people holding them should let their neighbours know about them, and even invite them to come. If they do that, they will be fairly well covered if any dispute arises. Of course, there is always the alternative of borrowing from a friend a property that is well insulated and away from people who might be disturbed by the party. It is all consideration and give and take.

Mr. Nicholls: My hon. Friend is an eminently reasonable and kind person, so he thinks that everybody will act in the way he suggests. However, I can recall another constituency case.

A friend of mine had a child who was having an 18th birthday party. My friend did as I am sure we would all do: he telephoned the neighbours and said, "Look, I've got bad news for you. James, Mark, Fiona or whoever is about to be 18 and there is going to be a ghastly party with long-haired people and dreadful music. We just wanted to let you know. Why don't you come on down at 8 o'clock, have a few drinks with us and take on board some anaesthetic and then it won't seem so bad?" What did those neighbours do? They telephoned the police and said that there was going to be a noisy party down the road.

I have read the Bill, but I cannot see anything that would provide a defence against that situation. The defence clause—4(2)—states:

"It is a defence for a person charged with an offence under this section to show that there was a reasonable excuse for the act, default or sufferance in question."

That is all well and good, but it will be a sad business if the few Meldrews in society find out about a party, disapprove of the time of night that it is being held, disapprove of the fact that it will involve young people with a lot of wretched noise and ghetto blasters, and decide that, at one minute past midnight, they will phone the local authority and say, "There's some noise, and I want you down here right now."

If it were my hon. Friend or me on the other end of that telephone, we might ask whether the noise had happened often and whether the person complaining had tried to discover whether it was a one-off 18th or 21st birthday party. What will that person's reaction be? He will probably say, "I am not interested in the motives. I am one of those difficult, awkward cusses who has been able to measure the decibel level. There is too much noise coming from that 18th birthday party, and I want it stopped."

It is all well and good for people to say that that would not happen, but I bet it will, and that is the problem. All of us who have been local councillors, and who are Members of Parliament and lawyers, know that one of the problems with legislation is not that we try to produce a set of regulations and directions to frame the activities of essentially reasonable people, but that we have to try to frame regulations that will not be misused by essentially unreasonable people.

I shall not labour the point, but, as I said, there is nothing in the Bill that I can see to stop a difficult, bloody-minded person saying that they are not going to allow a party to go on because they disapprove of such behaviour, and that they are going to stop it stone dead. I appreciate that nothing can be done today to address that, but it would be immensely sad if, in three, six or nine months' time, the Bill not only achieves what we want, but produces a Meldrew manifesto for the tiny number of unreasonable people in our society.

Mr. Harry Greenway: I can give my hon. Friend some reassurance. The local authority would have discretion over whether to proceed in the cases that he has cited, which is very important. An officer called to a scene may decide to attempt to resolve the problem informally. If he is satisfied that the noise constitutes a statutory noise nuisance, he is under a duty to serve an abatement notice under section 80 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. There is discretion, and environmental health officers will be people like my hon. Friend and me, as he has described—reasonable, sensible and fair. The matter should and will be properly covered by that means.

Mr. Nicholls: My hon. Friend rightly has a grasp of the detail that I could not pretend to have. I only hope that that is right. Clause 2(1) states:

"A local authority must, if they receive a complaint of the kind mentioned in subsection (2)",

ensure that it is investigated. The clause goes on to define the circumstances—excessive noise emitted from a dwelling during night-time hours.

Mr. Evennett: My hon. Friend is making some very good points. The problem is persistent noise nuisance,

which the local authority environmental health officer has the right to investigate. That is the key. If the noise occurred on one occasion, the investigation would be made on that basis. If, however, a property was the venue of an 18th birthday party every weekend, the noise would be persistent.

Mr. Nicholls: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. When I first entered the House of Commons, courts never looked at our deliberations, but merely considered what was plainly in the Act and what Parliament intended. In a number of respects, that has been altered, and I am sure that our exchanges will be looked at by local authorities when they are considering how they should exercise discretion. I am grateful to my hon. Friends the Members for Ealing, North (Mr. Greenway) and for Erith and Crayford (Mr. Evennett) for making that point.

If one is not careful, one can throw out the baby with the bath water. It was said earlier that the Bill follows steps that the Government have taken to proscribe rave and warehouse parties, where there would be illegal goings-on, which were obviously designed for, and have the effect of being, the venue for all sorts of illegal activity. Even in that context, some young people—curiously, sixth form students again—asked me at the time whether I was absolutely certain that Parliament was not discriminating against a type of activity in which a generation of a certain age that most of us have long since passed might not want to indulge.

Although I thought that that was wrong in relation to rave parties because I was able to make the point that we were after not a good bash, but something entirely different, such comments sound a note of caution for us. The last thing we would want to do—because it would be wrong for the image of the House, which is important, but also wrong per se—is produce rules and regulations that discriminate against one particular age group in our society and favour another simply because patterns of activities and pastimes differ.

Although I am grateful for the points made about the element of discretion, I can imagine a certain type of person leaning very hard on the environmental health officer and making it abundantly clear that they knew all about events, saying, "They say that it is just a one-off party, but that is entirely wrong. We should be allowed to sleep, and you ought to get out there now."

Difficult cases will require some intelligent and firm guidance on why the Bill was passed. If my hon. Friends are satisfied that those concerns are properly reflected in the Bill, I shall defer to them. I certainly hope that that is the case, because it should be so.

11.54 am

Mr. Evennett: We have had a good debate this morning. I give complete support to the Bill on Third Reading; it is a much-needed and long overdue measure. We look forward to it completing its parliamentary stages and going on to the statute book. We shall then look to the local authorities to implement it and make it effective.

We do not want to be killjoys, but we must realise that we are dealing with a real problem, which has affected so many people. I welcomed the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls), to which I listened with great interest. We are not talking only about young people who make noise, but about a wide range of people. We are talking about the do-it-yourself experts who want to do it all the time. Their wives—[*Laughter.*] We have a great opportunity for a bit of mirth at the end of these debates. Certainly there is a wide range of people who are noisy in their homes, which affects the health of many of their neighbours.

The Bill is a great step forward, although it is not the only answer. Education is needed to make young people and not-so-young people more aware of the noise they are making, to make them good citizens and to encourage them to turn down the radio and the television, so that less noise emanates from their dwellings. Education must play a part and there must be a sense of community spirit—the idea that the noise that a person makes may have a detrimental effect on neighbours.

The Bill is a great step forward. I welcome the debates in Committee and on Report; there have been some good and useful exchanges. The Bill was improved in Committee, and, as a result of the amendments that the Minister has promised will be tabled in another place, it will be a much better measure. It is a great start, and I am sure that many people will be pleased with it. I very much hope that it will be implemented, and that we use education to make people more conscious of the noise they make and the effect it has on their neighbours. I hope that people will turn down the noise.

11.56 am

Mr. Merchant: I welcome the Bill warmly, especially in view of the Minister's assurance that amendments will be tabled in the other place, which will overcome the problems about enforcement which rightly exercise people. I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Greenway) on his tremendous work in introducing the Bill and in piloting it through to this stage. I have participated, with great pleasure, in discussions on the Bill at each stage, because I strongly support my hon. Friend and believe that the Bill is so necessary.

The Bill is necessary fundamentally because the present law has failed the victims, and that failure needs to be put right. We are talking about an activity that is not just anti-social, but a form of mental assault. If the sleep deprivation that noise from neighbours brings was practised by the police or by the armed forces when interrogating people, it would count as torture. That is the seriousness of the problem.

With the greatest respect to my hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls), to whom I listened with great care and who made some valid points, I believe that the primary importance of the Bill is that it deals with persistent noise makers, the sort of people who upset many of my constituents.

Mr. Nicholls: For the avoidance of doubt, I absolutely accept that the Bill is targeted against such people. It is an excellent Bill, and the sooner it becomes law the better. The sole point I made was that we should ensure that we did not inadvertently sweep up people we did not want to be caught by the Bill.

Mr. Merchant: I am greatly reassured by that.

I believe that the one-off noisy party will not normally be brought within the ambit of the Bill. Perhaps my faith in human nature is greater than my hon. Friend's, but I

[Mr. Merchant]

believe that, if sensible, ordinary, socially-minded people want to have an 18th birthday party, a wedding celebration or whatever, they will usually do what one of my neighbours did a year or so ago, and send everybody within earshot a little note saying, "On Saturday night we are holding a wedding anniversary party".

The people I am talking about were not young people; they were quite elderly, and the anniversary must have been a 20th or a 25th. They warned all the neighbours, and the neighbours, being reasonable people, thought, "Well, there's nothing wrong with that," and smiled to themselves—or, if they were a little more sensitive, they might have mumbled to themselves, but they would have been prepared. They knew that such an event would not happen often—probably only once in 25 years. Certainly it was the only time that such a thing has happened in my area.

When the night came, the party was rather noisy and it did keep me awake, but that did not bother me at all. I simply thought, "They're having a good time," because I was impressed by the fact that those people had been polite and thoughtful enough to inform the neighbours.

If people had objected, after all that, what would they have done? They would have contacted their neighbours and said, "Your noise is getting a bit much. It is 3 in the morning and I can't sleep. Would you mind turning it down?" Most people, being reasonable, would have done so.

Even if things had gone a stage further—although I doubt whether they would have done—and the local authority had been called in, it would have had a duty under the Bill to come, and that is right and proper. But the local authority employee would have had a word with the people holding the party, I imagine in a perfectly friendly way, and the volume would have been turned down, never to be turned up again. Even if all that failed, the party would not be stopped, because the next step would be the issue of a warning notice, and then the noise would stop. But I imagine that by then the party would probably have come to an end, anyway.

I do not believe that there will be any problem for the one-off party of that nature. The Bill will stop, and is aimed at, the persistent noise-maker and troublemaker who causes such great distress that he effectively ruins people's lives. The Bill will give relief and protection from such people, primarily because of its massive deterrent impact. As I have read and understood the Bill at its various stages, that is its prime purpose. Its target is to prevent and deter.

However, in the unlikely event of the deterrence not working, for the few extreme cases that will remain, the Bill has within it a mechanism for taking firm, effective and thorough action to stop the noise. Because of those two aspects, the deterrence and the effective enforcement, the Bill will achieve a great deal. It will protect our constituents, and the fact that the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North will for ever be associated with it does him great credit.

12.2 pm

Mr. Thomason: Like other hon. Members who have spoken, I entirely support the Bill, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Greenway) on the work that he has put in. However, I should like to flag up one or two issues at this stage.

I am disappointed in that the Bill does not go far enough. I realise that one has to be cautious in introducing such legislation, and take things a step at a time. But the Bill is limited to night time, and I have certainly had complaints from constituents about noise during the day. Noise in the daytime is especially difficult for people with very small children, who may need to sleep during the day, and it is also difficult for the elderly. I hope that, in future, it may be possible to consider extending the hours if the Bill proves effective.

The second point that concerns me is the fact that the Bill applies only to noise emanating from dwellings. We may be told that there are already sufficient statutory provisions governing noise from other areas, but people in my constituency have certainly had problems caused by non-conforming users, whose noise has come not necessarily from an industrial process but from ghetto blasters played by people who are working. In a residential neighbourhood, even a building site can create an enormous amount of unnecessary noise—that is, noise unrelated to building activities.

In future, I hope that it will prove possible to extend this type of legislation to sites that are not purely dwelling houses, in situations in which existing legislation may be defective, or at least not sufficiently powerful.

I should be grateful if the Minister will deal with another concern. The Bill is quite specific about what is a dwelling—it uses the words "in a dwelling". I realise that many complaints come from occupants of flats, and particularly from occupants of houses that have been converted to flats, in which noise regulations may be insufficiently tight to cover noise travelling from one dwelling unit to another.

Some of those complaints, however, relate to dwellings in what was described earlier as "the leafy suburbs", where people sometimes take radios out into a garden and have a party at night. If it is a matter of an occasional party, I accept that perhaps there should not be a complaint about it. But people sometimes have parties regularly, which spill out into a garden area around the dwelling, and people sometimes make other noises with equipment during the night that is not entirely conducive to their neighbours' sleep.

I wonder whether it would be appropriate to consider carefully whether "dwelling" for the purposes of the Act includes the curtilage of a dwelling? If it does not, I wonder whether it might be right for another place to consider that matter. I understand that the normal definition of dwelling is deemed to include curtilage, but provisions in the Act—I think it is clause 2—state "in a dwelling", perhaps implying inside an accommodation unit. I shall be happy if I can be assured that the normal concept of dwelling will apply here, and that it will include gardens. I think that that matter needs clarification, and I should be delighted to receive it.

Mr. Harry Greenway: I reassure my hon. Friend on the important point that he is making, that the Bill will apply to dwelling houses, including gardens. That is written into the Bill.

Mr. Thomason: I am most grateful for that clarification.

I should like to mention one final point, which was touched on in some of the amendments I tabled that have not been called. I am a little concerned about threats that

may follow from people making complaints. It is a difficult issue. People who play loud radios or whatever are not always aware of the concerns of others, and sometimes behave in an overtly violent manner. People are clearly frightened about making complaints against neighbours, and particularly against neighbours of that disposition.

If those neighbours observe local authority officers going into a complainant's house and recording noise in that house or flat, it becomes self-evident who made the complaint. However, if local authority officers were required to take measurements outside a dwelling, the complainant could not be clearly ascertained. Noise levels would, of course, have to be adjusted, because what one hears outside will be louder than what is heard inside a neighbouring dwelling, but that can be easily overcome by the manner in which the Secretary of State prescribes noise levels. The possibility of intimidation should be carefully considered, and I trust reviewed, during the Bill's progress.

I re-emphasise that none of my comments is intended to be destructive of the Bill. It is an important step in the right direction. In recent years, there have been 17 recorded deaths as a direct result of noise nuisance. In the past 10 years, some 10,000 disputes between neighbours have been resolved by mediation, and 60 per cent. of those disputes were caused by noise. Noise is a serious problem, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North and his supporters on their work.

12.9 pm

Mr. Jenkin: I join in the general congratulations and the paeans of praises being heaped on my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Greenway), who has done a tremendous job in getting the Bill this far. I greatly look forward to it receiving a Third Reading and moving to another place for them up there to see whether they can improve it.

The Bill has widespread general support, and it must be encouraging for people outside to see Members of Parliament discussing something that affects their everyday lives and is not a matter of party political dispute. There are plenty of issues that unite hon. Members of all parties rather than divide us, and it is important that people outside realise that.

I pay tribute to Tendring district council and Colchester borough council for the work that their environmental health departments already do in trying to control noise. As Mr. Coulter, the director of environmental and technical services of Tendring council, pointed out to me in a letter:

"Social indicators show general environmental exposure to noise has increased and there is a greater expectation now to live in a quieter environment."

If the Bill achieves its objectives, we shall be helping local authorities such as Tendring to provide a quieter environment.

Colchester borough council said:

"We look forward, with interest, to the transformation of this Bill into an Act of Parliament."

That is a tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North.

However, in paying tribute to my hon. Friend and to people such as Colin Daines, the environmental control manager with Colchester borough council, I wish to draw the House's attention to something that we must not forget. If the Bill is successful, we shall increasingly be sending public servants into difficult and possibly dangerous situations. Confronting one party or the other in a serious dispute between neighbours can be extremely hazardous.

A letter from one of the local authorities in my area states:

"All the provisions, including service of both warning notice and fixed penalty and the seizure of equipment, would bring local authority officers into potentially highly dangerous conflict situations. There is a school of thought that the ability of the police to deal with night time noise in Scotland has its merits."

If we get the Bill on to the statute book, we must be ready to encourage the police to play their part in noise abatement. It is not right that we should expect civilian local authority public servants to put themselves in danger, as they will undoubtedly have to do if they are to achieve the Bill's objective.

As has been said, the Bill's aim is to ensure that people have the right to peace and quiet. It is a right that most of us can enjoy, although most of us have at some time been deprived of it, especially at night, which is the main subject of the Bill. The Bill is therefore a very necessary extension of human rights in a very important sphere.

I am reminded of a distinguished former Member of the House, who regularly had his hair cut by the House barber. The barber at that time was a chatty man and used to talk garrulously to his clients. When the former Member, who left the House some time ago, was asked, after a long preamble, "How would you like your hair cut, sir?", he replied, "In silence." That serves as a reminder that we all value our peace, quiet and silence, and we should do our best to extend that to as many people as possible.

12.14 pm

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: I congratulate the hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Greenway) on piloting the Bill through the House. Many people up and down the country will welcome it when it is fully enacted. I also congratulate *The Mail on Sunday* and the *Evening Standard* on the campaigns that they ran. I am sure that all of us who have experienced the problem in our constituencies or in our own lives agree that noise nuisance must be abhorred. Every year, the lives of thousands of people are made intolerable because of persistent noise caused by selfish and unthinking neighbours. As the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Mr. Thomason) pointed out, some 17 people have been killed or have committed suicide in the past few years as a result of neighbourhood disputes about noise.

The scale of the problem cannot be ignored and is everincreasing. In 1993-94, local authorities received 130,000 complaints about noise from domestic premises, an increase of 10 per cent. on the previous year and the seventh consecutive year in which an increase occurred. Since then, I expect that the increase has continued remorselessly.

The Bill will address some of the problems by introducing measures to stop noise at night, but it is only a start. Letters from my constituents and from those of other hon. Members reveal how complex noise disputes between neighbours can be. A constituent recently wrote to tell me that her life was made intolerable by the tenant

[Mrs. Bridget Prentice]

in the flat above, who stomped about all night, ran about shouting and threw things across the floor. My constituent became so miserable that she was forced to stay elsewhere with her children. But the noisy tenant was mentally ill, and had been moved into that accommodation as a result of the care in the community policy. Giving him a warning notice and fining him £100 would probably achieve very little.

The Bill is limited, but understandably so. It will help people who are suffering from the blasts of the stereo next door, but perhaps will not apply in sensitive cases where the situation is complicated by a more fundamental problem, such as mental illness. We need to look comprehensively at all the issues. However, it is time that we brought back the balance of rights and responsibilities that neighbours owe to one another, which at the moment seems to be out of kilter.

Labour fully recognises that every citizen and every family has a right to a quiet life, free from unacceptable noise, harassment and criminal behaviour from their neighbours. Last year, our document "A Quiet Life" proposed a new community safety order; a special form of injunction to restrain criminal anti-social behaviour by individuals or groups. Our proposals were tough—I see that the Under-Secretary is smiling. They are tough, but they need to be. It is time we recognised the hell that people's lives can turn into because of neighbours' irresponsible behaviour.

We all have a right to a quiet life and a responsibility to live quietly, so that others can enjoy their lives. I pay tribute to Val Gibson and the Right to Peace and Quiet Campaign, based in the constituency of the hon. Member for Erith and Crayford (Mr. Evennett). We in Lewisham have benefited from the campaign, and my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, West (Mr. Dowd) was successful a year or two ago in our borough, with the support of Val Gibson. I should add that my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Ms Ruddock), who led for the Opposition during the Second Reading debate, cannot be here today but endorses Third Reading.

I should like to mention briefly the most controversial aspect of the Bill, which is about mandatory or adoptive measures. I said earlier that four out of five environmental health officers were worried that their authorities would not implement the new power if the matter were left purely to choice. We strongly feel that the problems caused by noise are so severe that the Bill should have been mandatory. I have some regrets that the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Erith and Crayford was not accepted. However, I take hope and assurance from the Minister's response, and I look forward to the amendments in another place that might make that provision a little more possible.

Noise disturbance in urban areas is particularly marked because of the nature of urban areas. The hon. Member for Erith and Crayford mentioned that earlier. We are also concerned about the unfair situation that would arise when noise makers on one side of the street faced fixed penalty notices and those on the other could make as much noise as they wanted because the street was divided by a local authority boundary. So I welcome amendment No. 5, tabled by the hon. Member for Ealing, North, which will take account of that. To allow people such unequal rights to peace and quiet would simply be unfair.

Mention was made of Wandsworth and Lambeth. I would not want to see the council tax payers of Lambeth having to bear the burden of keeping Wandsworth a peaceful and quiet place. It works in both directions.

Of course, the problem of noise is not confined to urban areas. Mention has been made of rural areas and the difficulties that can arise there. Problems include loud music, raves and such like. We have to be cognisant of those things. Of course, the severity of the problem varies in different areas and there must be some flexibility of response so that resources are not wasted. None the less, I strongly believe that anyone suffering from unbearable noise made by their neighbours deserves the backing and support of his or her council in dealing with the problem.

Noise now generates more complaints to environmental health departments than any other subject, and lives are at stake. We have to take the problem seriously. One of the most important changes in the Bill is the introduction of fixed penalty notices. I am delighted that the penalty was increased from £40 to £100 in Committee, because I am aware that local authorities felt that, at £40, the level would have been derisory and would have undermined the financial penalties for statutory noise nuisance. I believe that the fixed penalty notice will have an instant deterrent effect on those making noise and will avoid a long wait for court time. The on-the-spot remedy is necessary to stop noise speedily at its source, but it is not without its problems.

As the hon. Member for Romford (Sir M. Neubert) said, when local authority officers are sent out, they may feel an element of danger. Some may be unwilling to enter a property without the support of a police officer. We know that many local authorities and police forces work well together in a number of partnership areas. I hope that that will turn out to be another such possibility.

That equally applies to police co-operation in using the powers to confiscate noise equipment. I can say to the hon. Member for Ealing, North that we were delighted that the Bill made provision for the seizure of equipment and that it now clarifies what can be taken. I am encouraged by the fact that the vast majority of senior environmental health officers believe that they will be very likely to use those powers. However, they would be worried about using them in some instances without police co-operation. I stress that we hope that the police will work closely with local authorities on the issue and that provision will be made for adequate police back-up when local authorities undertake the new duties.

The Bill applies only to England and Wales and Northern Ireland. Mention has been made of Scotland and I cannot resist picking up that point. The Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982 allows the police considerably greater powers on noise, including the power to stop people singing if it is causing others a nuisance. Perhaps when the Bill is reviewed one day, we should consider whether some of the laws that apply in Scotland should be extended to England and Wales.

The Bill refers to the making of noise above a certain level, which the Secretary of State will determine. We are currently talking about 35 dB, which I fear may be too high. Music and words may be clearly audible in someone's house and loud enough to constitute a nuisance at lower noise levels. While it is intended that the night noise provision is separate from, and in addition to, statutory noise procedures, there is a danger that the level

chosen for the night noise offence will be regarded as acceptable and therefore used as a defence against statutory nuisance proceedings. That would make matters substantially worse for people who suffer from noisy neighbours. I hope that the noise level will be set as low as is reasonable.

The Opposition support the Bill. It is a first step to alleviate some of the most difficult problems that people face. I look forward to amendments being made in another place to enhance it further. I congratulate again the hon. Member for Ealing, North on getting it through. I hope that it will have a speedy passage, so that my constituents in Lewisham and those of other hon. Members can enjoy a quiet life.

12.26 pm

Mr. Clappison: My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Greenway) fully deserves the warm congratulations that have been showered upon him from both sides of the House. We heard on Second Reading and in Committee how widespread is the problem of noise in everyday life, especially in urban settings. There is already a substantial body of legislation to protect people who suffer from noise and noisy neighbours, but I am sure that his Bill will be recognised in the fulness of time as an important addition to existing protection. It will help local authorities and environmental health officers to tackle the problem of noise and, most importantly, give relief and protection to members of the public who suffer from the problem of night-time noise.

We have had an important but short Third Reading debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) made a valuable contribution. We must be wary of the people whom he described as the Victor Meldrews of society—people of an unreasonable disposition. I invite him to take as a starting point the right of members of the public and householders to peace and quiet at night. We cannot go into their minds and examine their motives, dispositions and reasons for wanting to uphold it, but that right exists and if it has been violated, they deserve protection and to have it upheld. In most cases, there would be more to it than that. In fact, the Bill will relieve people who suffer from the sort of problems described by my hon. Friends of persistent noise makers—especially involving loud music, but including other sorts of noise—who behave unreasonably.

My hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge made a valuable point. We must all be reasonable and considerate. An obvious and good first step for someone having a party would be to contact neighbours and possibly to think of inviting them.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): Although I did not have a chance to involve myself with the Bill previously, I have been following the debate today. My hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) made an important point. I am not satisfied that the Bill contains any protection against the persistent complainant. We have been talking about the persistent offender, but what happens if someone does not behave reasonably and keeps complaining? Clause 2(1) states that a "local authority must" take action if it receives a complaint. What will happen if someone unreasonably complains time and again?

Mr. Clappison: It is up to the neighbour to ensure that there is no substance in the complaint and that the right is not being violated. That is the first step. Hon. Friends who are concerned about the Bill will see that a number of safeguards are built in and that it is not possible for an unreasonable person to take it into his head to persecute his next-door neighbour by alleging noise. First, there is the protection that the matter is in the hands of the local environmental health officer. It is up to him whether he decides to serve a notice under clause 2(4), which states: "he may serve a notice"—

he is not obliged to do so, but the power is there.

I also invite my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) to consider the fact that a notice must be served before there is any question of a fixed penalty or any other fine being incurred. That notice gives the person who receives it a warning that the amount of noise coming from his or her premises exceeds the fixed permitted level, and it is up to that person to do something about it.

Frankly, if someone who receives such a notice pays it no heed and continues to make noise above the permitted level between the hours of 11 pm and 7 am, he or she is clearly violating an established right. I suggest that safeguards are there in the form of the notice and the discretion. It is up to people to think about their neighbours and to respect their right to peace and quiet.

Mr. Jenkin: With the greatest respect, the concern of my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) was the vexatious complainant and the initiation of the process. Clause 2 contains protection for the local authority against having to investigate every vexatious complaint. The obligation is to take "reasonable steps". If the initial complaint is unreasonable, in that it is a repeat of a complaint that has been found wanting time and again, I think that there is no obligation on a local authority to continue to investigate. I should be grateful if my hon. Friend the Minister would confirm that.

Mr. Clappison: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point. He will know that local authorities already have the power to investigate complaints against those who are breaching statutory noise nuisance regulations, which apply around the clock and not just at night. No doubt they can adopt the same practices with regard to offences under this Bill, with the same result.

It is important to establish that, if someone is making noise above a certain level at night, he or she is violating a right. The hon. Member for Lewisham, East (Mrs. Prentice) referred to the level of noise, and it is an important point. It is set at a level that is thought to be intrusive and to affect a good night's sleep between 11 pm and 7 am.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Mr. Thomason) asked what would happen about noise made at other times. We are all aware of the problems of shift workers, people with young children and babies and so forth. He should be aware that the existing law of statutory nuisance will apply on such occasions. As I understand it, a duty is placed on local authorities to take reasonably practicable steps to investigate complaints of statutory nuisance, which can be brought before the courts and proved in the same way that that is proved now. This offence clarifies the situation with regard to night-time noise, by introducing a fixed limit and other provisions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, North (Mr. Jenkin) made an important point about police officers—I think that the hon. Member for Lewisham,

[Mr. Clappison]

East mentioned that, too—and how they fit into the scheme of things in the Bill. That was debated at some length in Committee.

Of course, police officers may at present play a role in the investigation of statutory nuisance by local authority officers. In Committee, hon. Members spoke from their experience of situations in which local authority officers needed the assistance of the police, especially when there might be a threat to order. The hon. Lady may know that the Association of Chief Police Officers is working with the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health to develop a code of practice on liaison. Obviously, we hope that that work brings worthwhile results and assists in liaison. Local authority officers should receive help when there is a threat to order in such situations.

The Bill will be of assistance in setting a fixed level of noise—it does not leave scope for argument about whether noise is too loud. When the noise measurement is taken, the environmental health officer will be able to point out to the noise maker that the noise is above the permitted level. The Bill introduces a level of clarity, which will be helpful.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove asked for the definition of "dwelling", and my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North referred him to clause 11(3)(a). I hope that that definition satisfies my hon. Friend—he is nodding in agreement.

There have been questions whether the Bill would apply, for example, to commercial kennels, stables, cowsheds and the like. The Bill deals with domestic sources of noise. Trials of the technical aspects of the night noise offence have shown that the method cannot readily measure intermittent noise, such as a dog barking or a horse neighing. As I have already said, avenues are available to people through the existing law to deal with such situations.

Dogs may bark in the night and caravans may move on, but the Bill will be a lasting tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North. He is concerned for his constituents. He will have the satisfaction of having brought before the House a measure that will protect the right of people to a peaceful night's sleep. The measure will be widely welcomed in the community.

Mr. Harry Greenway: I warmly thank the Minister for his consistent support and for his kind remarks. I also thank the hon. Member for Lewisham, East (Mrs. Prentice) for her kind remarks. I thank my colleagues for their support, which has been greatly appreciated. We have had great teamwork in this regard—we are working to gain a better life for our constituents, and that is what matters.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

Treasure Bill

As amended (in the Standing Committee), considered.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Order for Third Reading read.

12.37 pm

Sir Anthony Grant (South-West Cambridgeshire): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I am encouraged by the warm welcome that the Bill has received. It had good cross-party support on Second Reading and in Committee. However, three points have arisen during the passage of the Bill and I would like to clear them up.

The National Art Collection Fund wrote to me, and to other members of the Committee, saying that the Bill does not go far enough, and, in particular, that it fails to provide protection to all archaeologically significant objects. The scope of the Bill has always been constrained by the need to avoid any resource implications.

As I said in Committee, I recognise that many important objects will be excluded from the current definition of "treasure" in the Bill. Quite simply, it is impossible to frame a definition that includes all those objects that are agreed to be important, while at the same time excluding common finds of limited archaeological interest.

Clause 2 gives the Secretary of State the power to designate additional classes of object as treasure by statutory instrument, thus making it possible to review the operation of the new system from time to time, and to make the adjustments that might be found necessary without having to introduce primary legislation.

Mr. Roy Thomason (Bromsgrove): I congratulate my hon. Friend on introducing the Bill, and commend him for all the hard work that he has put into it. At this stage, does he think that it would be appropriate to consider widening the definition in the Bill to include bronze objects, which often have considerable value as antiquities?

Sir Anthony Grant: We debated that in considerable detail in Committee. It remains for the Government to pursue that possibility through the measure provided in the Bill.

A recent survey suggested that about 400,000 objects of archaeological interest are found each year. To include all those objects within the definition of treasure would make the Bill so contentious to metal detectorists and landowners that it would never get through Parliament. In any case, substantial additional resources would be needed to operate such a system.

I echo what my hon. Friend the Minister said in Committee:

> "In an idea world, the provisions of the Bill would have been more wide ranging . . . however, it would not have been possible to get such a . . . Bill through.—*Official Report, Standing Committee C*, 17 April 1996; c.12.]

So half a loaf is better than no bread.

Some archaeologists had their doubts about the Bill when it was originally introduced in another place by Lord Perth two years ago. I understand, however, that, now that the Government have admitted in their

discussion document "Portable Antiquities" that there is an urgent need to deal with the problem of recording all archaeological finds—not just those covered by the Bill—my Bill enjoys wide support from the archaeological world, which recognises that it is the best that can be achieved.

Lord Renfrew, a leading archaeologist—and, I am happy to say, a most distinguished academic from Cambridge, and a supporter of the Bill—has acknowledged its achievement. The two initiatives represented by my Bill and the proposal for a voluntary scheme of recording all archaeological objects represent a major advance. Should the Minister catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, he may say a little more about the Government's proposals.

I hope that the National Art Collections Fund will join all other leading archaeological bodies and museums in supporting the two-pronged strategy in the Bill.

I have received a letter from the Country Landowners Association underlining its support for my Bill, for which I am grateful. It asked for an assurance, however, that the code of practice on rewards that it provides should make it clear that such rewards will only be allocated to trespassers in the most exceptional circumstances. I agree, and I sympathise with that request.

I am aware that some of my hon. Friends said on Second Reading that the Bill should specify that in no circumstances should trespassers be rewarded. I have considered the matter carefully, and I have concluded that an amendment to that effect could cause difficulties, because the circumstances of each case are different, and many cases would not be black and white. In practice, there would be many grey cases, and I do not believe that it would be appropriate to include a precise provision on the allocations of rewards in the Bill.

The Secretary of State should instead be given a limited discretion within the guidelines set out in the code of practice, which will, of course, be the subject of public consultation before it is finalised. I hope that the Minister will be able to spell out in more detail what he thinks should be the guiding principles on the payment of rewards.

Thirdly, I know that many metal detectorists have written to their Member of Parliament, expressing their fears that my Bill is directed solely against detectorists, and saying that it is a first step in an attempt to ban metal detecting. I say once again, clearly, that nothing could be further from the truth. Nothing in the Bill is hostile to metal detectorists. It contains no restrictions on metal detecting; it simply clarifies what should and should not be reported.

I entirely agree with the words of Mr. Dennis Jordan, president of the National Council for Metal Detecting, who pointed out in a letter to *The Times* on 19 April 1996:

> "The Bill will apply to all persons intentionally searching for or casually finding treasure. It is not directed solely at metal detectorists. All those who find treasure, whether they are detectorists, archaeologists or chance finders such as farmers or workmen, will be equally subject to the provisions, as is the case indeed under the existing law."

I was very glad that my hon. Friend the Minister of State gave an assurance on Second Reading that neither the Government nor the European Union have any plans to ban or restrict responsible metal detecting. I believe, and have repeatedly said, that responsible detectorists have an important role to play in recovering and saving our rich heritage.

Officials of the Department of National Heritage and of the British museum have held a series of meetings about the Bill with the National Council for Metal Detecting, and they have put it on record that they found the national council's contributions to the discussions very useful indeed.

I have now made four separate amendments to the Bill to allay the detectorists' fears. Taken together, they significantly improve the Bill.

Mr. Thomason: I come to this subject relatively fresh, but I note the provisions in clause 1, which stipulates a period by virtue of which something will fall within the ambit of the Bill. I do not wish to be destructive of the provision—on the contrary, I believe that the Bill is an excellent step—but I wonder whether there is a danger that people will inadvertently breach the provisions by virtue of those specific periods, and items falling outside or inside the age requirement, bearing in mind that the offences, as stipulated later in the Bill, appear to be of an absolute nature. I seek clarification.

Sir Anthony Grant: That provision—like many others—is meant to be interpreted reasonably. No one will suggest that someone who makes an accidental mistake will be dealt with in a draconian fashion. The sensible answer for anyone who discovers something is to take the advice of experts—of whom there are plenty. I anticipate no difficulty. That point was not taken up in Committee.

I believe that the Bill is improved by the amendments I have made. I repeat that, without the co-operation of all the finders who reported their finds promptly to the proper authorities in recent years, a great deal of valuable information about our nation's past would have been lost. Responsible detectorists do have a very important part to play in our national heritage, for the benefit of us all.

I hope that, once the dust has settled and they realise that the Bill is not the threat that some people have attempted to portray, detectorists and archaeologists will be able to work together harmoniously, in the interests of our heritage.

I express my thanks to those who have put so much effort into treasure trove reform over a long period. As I acknowledged on Second Reading, many people have devoted a great deal of their time over many years. I shall single out three who may have made the greatest contribution.

First, the project would not have got off the ground without the extraordinary determination and enthusiasm of Lord Perth. I know how disappointing it was for him that his 1994 Treasure Trove Bill *[Lords]* never made progress in the House because it had not received time for debate. I hope that he now feels that his efforts were not in vain.

Secondly, I acknowledge the work of the Surrey Archaeological Society, which started this initiative nearly 10 years ago. I think especially of its honorary secretary, Mr. David Graham, who has worked tirelessly on this for many years in a purely honorary capacity.

Finally, I pay tribute to Dr. Roger Bland—a fellow Pauline, although at school more recently than I—who has been a fountain of knowledge and a tower of strength throughout the Bill's passage.

[Sir Anthony Grant]

As I said on Second Reading, this is an historic occasion, because this is the first piece of legislation in this area that has ever been debated by this House. I trust that we will now join the great majority of other civilised countries in passing a law to protect our rich and important heritage of portable antiquities. I hope that hon. Members will join me in wishing the Bill a safe and speedy passage through the other place.

12.50 pm

Mr. Mark Fisher (Stoke–on–Trent, Central): I wish briefly to join the hon. Member for South–West Cambridgeshire (Sir A. Grant) in congratulating and praising those people outside the House whom he identified—Ted Graham, Roger Bland and others—without whom the processes of this House would be much less well informed. We certainly would not have reached this stage with the Bill.

In particular, we congratulate Lord Perth, the father of this Bill, who has a very able and interesting son in its promoter. The Bill was well debated on Second Reading and in Committee. There is not much more to say, except to reiterate the Opposition's support for this sensible, well thought-out and constructive piece of legislation.

I hope that, when the Minister replies to what I think will be a very brief debate, he will say something about the code of practice that will augment and amplify the Bill. The Bill provides a framework that has been much needed for many years. The code of practice will be essential in determining how effective the framework will be.

Hon. Members recognise that this is not the last word on the subject—the whole question of portable antiquities and the wider aspects raised by the Bill remains to be clarified and resolved—the Bill is an excellent start. I hope that it enjoys the Government's support, and that it will be constructively and intelligently implemented.

12.52 pm

The Minister of State, Department of National Heritage (Mr. Iain Sproat): I begin by saying how grateful we are to my hon. Friend the Member for South–West Cambridgeshire (Sir A. Grant). He decently and properly paid tribute to those who have done so much in the past. It is worth placing on the record the fact that, traditionally, this sort of Bill is not easy to get through Parliament, for all sorts of technical parliamentary reasons. My hon. Friend mentioned the Bill introduced by Lord Perth and said that it had foundered because of a lack of parliamentary time.

I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend on his handling of the problem relating to metal detectorists. There was a great deal of misunderstanding about how the Bill could affect them. Time after time, my hon. Friend has made himself available to speak to and reassure them. Now, with his final—I hope and presume—declaration that the Bill will in no way harm metal detectorists, I am sure that the fear among that fraternity can be laid to rest. It is a tribute to my hon. Friend that he has managed to take a potentially problematic part of the Bill through the House without contention.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Mr. Thomason) raised a couple of important points with which I will deal later. More generally, the question whether bronze should be included is being considered. In fact, if the Secretary of State finds that certain classes of objects should be added, he will have the power to do so by order—by affirmative resolution, I think.

My hon. Friend was also concerned that somebody would find a hoard, part of a hoard or an object of value and not declare that within the 14 days specified in the Bill, thereby being in breach of the law. My hon. Friend can be reassured that written into our previous debates, both in the Chamber and in Committee, was the provision that any reasonable excuse—such as, "I didn't realise it was an ancient bit of a sword," or, "This was part of a hoard of valuable coins"—will be taken into account, no doubt under Pepper *v.* Hart or whatever, by the courts. Although my hon. Friend can be reasonably sure that both his points will be covered, I shall deal with them in rather more detail shortly.

The hon. Member for Stoke–on–Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) made an important point on portable antiquities. The reason why I might take slightly longer to address this point than my hon. Friend the Member for South–West Cambridgeshire did is that, although the Bill is important, it is only one part of the Government's strategy, as the hon. Gentleman acknowledged by implication.

It is extremely important that, on Third Reading, I explain the Government's view—as opposed to my hon. Friend's view of his Bill—as outlined in the portable antiquities document which, as the House knows, we published in February and on which we are consulting until, I think, the end of next month, given all the points that were raised in Committee on whether such and such an object would have to be reported, how we would ensure that we have a record of the provenance of various discovered objects, and how all such points are taken into account.

I should like to respond to two points that my hon. Friend the Member for South–West Cambridgeshire raised: first, the criticism that the Bill does not go far enough, and, secondly, the question of rewards, which was a matter of great concern to hon. Members on Second Reading. I know that the Country Landowners Association has raised it again.

My hon. Friend mentioned the concerns of the National Art Collections Fund that the scope of the Bill is too restricted. In order to answer that very important point, it might be helpful if I explained to the House the proposals set out in our recently published discussion document on portable antiquities, since it is vital to realise that the initiative complements the Bill.

The Government believe that it is important to distinguish between two quite separate aspects of the problem: the public acquisition of finds, and the recording of them. Treasure trove, in effect, gives museums the right of first refusal to certain finds, providing that they can find the money to pay full rewards for them. The Bill addresses the anomalies of the archaic law of treasure trove. On the other hand, there is widespread agreement that the reporting of finds, so that they can be properly recorded, is of key importance—more important in some ways, as I am sure my hon. Friend would not mind me saying, than the public acquisition of them.

Understandably, given parliamentary constraints, the Bill will make only limited adjustments to the classes of objects that are legally required to be reported, and there will continue to be no legal requirement to report other important categories of find. For that reason, we have published a discussion document on portable antiquities, which contains proposals for a voluntary scheme for the recording of all archaeological objects found in England and Wales.

The Government accept that the present arrangements for the recording of portable antiquities are, on the whole, not working well and that there is an urgent need for action to record such objects, as they are irreplaceable and of great importance to the nation's heritage.

We believe that portable antiquities are important for two main reasons: intrinsically, for what they tell us about the people who made and used them, and as evidence for the existence of hitherto unknown archaeological sites. Unfortunately, much potential knowledge to be gained from finds is lost, because arrangements for their recording vary greatly in quality across the country. Increasing concern is being expressed by archaeologists and others that important archaeological information, arising from the objects themselves or from the opportunity to carry out investigations, is being lost in this way.

We recognise that the great majority of metal detector users practise their hobby responsibly, especially those who belong to clubs affiliated to the National Council for Metal Detecting. Many readily co-operate with museums and archaeologists—a professional opinion can add greatly to the interest of an important find. However, it remains very unsatisfactory that, for the majority of cases, there are no arrangements—formal or otherwise—for finds to be recorded. The Department believes that the excellent arrangements in place in a few areas provide a pointer to what we should be trying to achieve over time throughout the country.

The document states that, although most archaeological objects are found today with metal detectors, by no means all are. We would therefore need to look at the arrangements for the reporting of archaeological objects, even if metal detectors did not exist. It also states that to deplore the loss to our knowledge caused by the lack of arrangements for the reporting of finds is not a criticism of finders but simply highlights the weakness of the current reporting arrangements.

Just as we have made it clear that the proposed reform of treasure trove will not contain any restrictions on legitimate metal detecting, so our proposals on the recording of archaeological objects will seek to involve metal detectorists as far as possible. Metal detectorists rightly point out that they are responsible for finding most of the archaeological objects that come to light, so the Government hope that they will welcome the opportunity to have their finds recorded more easily than is possible at the moment. Metal detectorists would also, of course, benefit from having their finds identified, and it is worth stressing that the proposals would not in any way extend the rights of museums to acquire finds.

The discussion document looks at the relative merits of voluntary and compulsory systems for the recording of finds. Under a voluntary system, the Government would draw up, in consultation with representatives of museums, archaeological organisations and metal detectorists, a voluntary scheme for the recording of archaeological objects found in England and Wales.

We believe that, if the scheme is to be effective, it will need to be accompanied by a campaign of education to encourage finders to report their finds. One of the advantages of such an approach is that it would not require primary legislation, so, providing that general agreement for it could be obtained, it could be introduced with the minimum of delay.

A compulsory system, on the other hand, would require primary legislation, and that would cut across the approach behind the Bill. There must also be severe doubts whether a statutory requirement to report all archaeological objects would be effective, given that it is unlikely that there would be a consensus behind such an approach. A recent survey estimated that there are 30,000 metal detectorists finding perhaps 400,000 objects of archaeological significance each year.

Last year, the Council of British Archaeology established a standing conference on portable antiquities, with the aim of bringing together all the leading archaeological and museum bodies to reach a consensus on these issues. At its first meeting last year, the standing conference approved a resolution urging the early reintroduction of the Treasure Bill into Parliament, together with the introduction of a reporting scheme for archaeological artefacts that were outside the scope of the Bill.

I am drawing those two points together so that everyone can understand what we have done, why we are doing it and the time scale within which we are doing it. I believe that the standing conference will acknowledge that considerable progress has been made in both those directions. It had its second meeting on 1 May, to which my Department sent a senior official as an observer, and I have been encouraged to learn that it unanimously backed the idea of a voluntary scheme for the recording of all archaeological objects.

I mention that point to show that there now seems to be a consensus in the archaeological and museum world on the best way forward. There has not always been agreement, and the fact that there is now general support from archaeologists and museum curators for a limited reform of treasure trove, combined with a voluntary recording scheme, means that progress will be that much easier. We should recognise that the new approach means that the archaeological world has moved substantially in favour of a spirit of co-operation with metal detectorists and away from earlier attempts to ban or restrict the activity. I like to think that my Department has helped to move that process along.

I understand that some antiquities dealers have already said that they would welcome a voluntary scheme, but would resist a compulsory scheme. I know from discussions that officials from my Department have had with metal detectorists that they would also participate in a voluntary scheme, but would probably oppose a compulsory one. For those reasons, I believe that there is every likelihood that a voluntary scheme will win general support. Our provisional view is that it would be right initially to go for a voluntary system, while recognising that there might be a need in the long term to move towards a legal requirement if the voluntary system proved to be ineffective.

[Mr. Iain Sproat]

I stress that those conclusions are only provisional, as the consultation period for the discussion document does not close until the end of June. Nevertheless, I hope that, if agreement is forthcoming, we may be able to take the proposals forward during the autumn. At the same time, we shall also consider how such a scheme might be funded. The House will understand that we felt that it was best to obtain agreement on the principle of a voluntary approach first.

I stress that we view these proposals as being as important in their way as the Treasure Bill. I have set them out in some detail, because I would like to assure the National Art Collections Fund and others that we are giving the issue a high priority.

I now turn to the question of rewards, which my hon. Friend the Member for South–West Cambridgeshire mentioned this morning, and which many hon. Members mentioned on Second Reading and in Committee. I believe that the Bill strikes a fair compromise between the interests of finders and landowners, which are not necessarily the same.

I understand that the view has been expressed that the Bill will compulsorily deprive landowners of their property. That is highly misleading. At present, the legal position concerning title to discovered objects that are not treasure trove is very ambiguous, and in recent cases, both finders and landowners have been able to assert their claims.

Under the existing law of treasure trove, any gold or silver objects that were buried with the intention of recovery, and whose owner is unknown, become the property of the Crown. The Bill will widen the number of objects that can be claimed by the Crown only in a very modest way.

The current practice is that the Crown offers treasure troves to museums, which must pay the finder a full reward if they wish to keep them; otherwise, the objects are returned to the finder. At present, landowners are not eligible for rewards under any circumstances—not even if the finder has been trespassing, so long as he has reported his find promptly. Under the Bill, rewards will still be payable when museums wish to acquire treasure, and it will make landowners and occupiers eligible for rewards for the first time. It will also give them the right to be informed of finds of treasure reported to have been made on their land.

The Country Landowners Association, whose support for the Bill, as my hon. Friend the Member for South–West Cambridgeshire said, is most welcome, has asked for clarification on how rewards are to be allocated under the Bill. As my hon. Friend said, the CLA is concerned in particular about the possibility of trespassers receiving rewards, Some of the hon. Members who spoke on Second Reading felt that it should be written into the Bill that under no circumstances should trespassers be rewarded.

However, I endorse what my hon. Friend said about the need to retain some discretion in the payment of rewards. In the Department, we know from experience that many of the cases that arise are not straightforward. There is a real risk that a provision stating that under no circumstances would finders who were trespassing be eligible for rewards, would be a serious disincentive to the reporting of finds. It could therefore drive many finds on to the black market, and possibly lead to their being exported without a licence, which would achieve nothing.

During the Committee stage on Lord Perth's Bill in another place in March 1994, my colleague Lady Trumpington said:

> "I cannot emphasize too strongly that our paramount objective is to encourage the reporting of finds. We clearly need to ensure that adequate incentives to finders are preserved under any new arrangements. At the same time we want to discourage wrong behaviour."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 23 March 1994; Vol. 553, c. 733.]

Those are the principles that will guide us.

Detailed guidelines on how the Secretary of State will pay rewards will be set out in the code of practice provided for in clause 11, which will be drawn up in consultation with interested parties—for example, bodies representing landowners, metal detectorists and museums. As a further safeguard, the code will have to be approved by both Houses of Parliament through the affirmative resolution procedure before the Bill can take effect.

Obviously it would be wrong for me to anticipate here what may come out of the consultations on the code of practice. However, I can say that we envisage that landowners and occupiers will be eligible for rewards under certain circumstances—for example, if the finder has clearly been trespassing.

I can reassure the Country Landowners Association that where there is clear evidence that a finder has been intentionally and knowingly trespassing for the purpose of searching for treasure, we would not expect him to be eligible for a reward. However, in the great majority of cases, in which the finder has permission to be on the land, we expect that the Department would comply with any arrangement made between the finder and the landowner over the division of any reward.

Before leaving that part of the Bill, it is important to stress that clause 11(5) does not mean that rewards will routinely be split equally between finders, occupiers and landowners. As I have said, our general approach will be to respect agreements made between finders and landowners. Finders normally make an agreement to split any reward equally with the landowner as a condition for receiving permission to search on their land, and the Government would like to encourage that as an example of good practice.

Before I conclude, I shall remind the House of the main points of the Bill. Its chief purpose is to clarify exactly what type of find should be reported, and what will be classed as treasure. At present, that is unclear, and is the cause of much confusion.

The Bill is therefore essentially a technical measure intended to deal with the worst anomalies of the current law, and to streamline the present rather cumbersome administration of treasure trove cases. However, the Bill's successful passage will have a symbolic importance beyond the significance of its individual provisions, as it will represent the first piece of antiquities legislation ever passed in this country.

The problem with treasure trove, of course, is that it was never intended as an antiquities law. As hon. Members will know by now, only objects made of gold or silver that have been deliberately buried with the intention of recovery and of which the owner is unknown fall within the scope of treasure trove.

There are four main shortcomings of treasure trove. First, many very important single finds that may have been lost rather than buried intentionally, such as the Middleham jewel, are excluded, and many assemblages that have been scattered by ploughing may also fail to qualify if there is no evidence of their having been buried together.

Secondly, the possibility that certain deposits, particularly from the iron age period, may be votive in nature has recently caused great confusion. Thirdly, the requirement that only objects that are substantially gold or silver can be treasure trove is also the cause of much confusion, and has led to many hoards being split, which is patently absurd. Finally, objects not made of precious metal that are found with items of treasure, such as pottery or engraved gemstones, are excluded.

The Bill attempts to deal with those problems in three ways. First, and most important, it will change the definition of treasure by removing the need to prove that objects must have been intentionally buried, by making it clear exactly how much gold or silver objects must contain in order to be treasure, and by including objects found in association with finds of treasure. Secondly, it will streamline the system of administration by making it much simpler to determine what is treasure, and by removing the need for coroners to summon juries to treasure inquests. Finally, it will make the law enforceable, by providing a new offence for the non-declaration of treasure.

The Bill will certainly not allow people to look for treasure in graves—a worry that was certainly expressed in Committee, as my hon. Friend the Member for South–West Cambridgeshire will remember. Graves are fully protected by law, and licences are needed to open them. The point is simply that objects covered by the new law discovered at an unknown burial site will now qualify as treasure. It is also misleading to state that this Bill will encourage criminally minded finders rather than discourage them. The Bill will, in fact, make the law more enforceable by closing a number of loopholes in the present law.

Equally, however, innocent finders who fail to report treasure because they did not know that they should have done so—a point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Mr. Thomason)—will not be penalised under the Bill. Clause 8 requires finders of treasure to report their finds within 14 days, but it also states that any person who has a "reasonable excuse" for failing to report his find to the coroner will have a defence against prosecution for non-declaration. That will protect, for example, a farmer who discovers an object that subsequently turns out to be treasure while ploughing, or a workman who discovers an object while digging a trench and fails to report it because he did not realise that he should have done so.

The Bill also has great flexibility. Clause 2 contains a provision that gives the Secretary of State the power to add or remove categories of object from the definition of treasure set out in the Bill. As my hon. Friend the Member for South–West Cambridgeshire said, that provision will make it possible to review the operation of the new system after a period, and to make such adjustments as might be found to be necessary without having to introduce primary legislation.

The Bill also provides safeguards against the arbitrary use of those powers by the Secretary of State, by stating that any change to the definition of treasure should be made by a statutory instrument that would be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure by both Houses of Parliament.

The Government feel that the most encouraging sign for the future lies in the fact that, as I said, there appears to be a growing consensus among archaeologists and metal detectorists in favour of co-operation. I feel that my Department has an important role to play in fostering such a spirit of co-operation. A recently published book on metal detecting prominently displays the following message on its back cover:

"This book promotes responsible behaviour among detectorists and advocates the recording and reporting of all finds."

That is from a book by Andrew Palmer, entitled "The Metal Detecting Book", which was published in 1995.

Equally, I believe that archaeologists are increasingly willing to acknowledge the contribution played by metal detectorists in bringing archaeological finds to light, and actively to seek their co-operation in excavations. Taken together, this Bill and the proposals in our discussion document on portable antiquities represent the best chance yet of securing improvements to the current arrangements for the acquisition and recording of portable antiquities, which we recognise are less than ideal.

Once again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South–West Cambridgeshire for his hard work on this important Bill, and thank Opposition Members for their support. I hope that it goes speedily through another place.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

Railway Heritage Bill

Not amended (in the Standing Committee), considered.

Clause 3

DESIGNATION OF RECORDS AND ARTEFACTS

1.14 pm

Mr. Mark Robinson (Somerton and Frome): I beg to move amendment No. 1, in page 2, line 30, at beginning insert

'Subject to subsection (4) below,'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Geoffrey Lofthouse): With this, it will be convenient to discuss also amendment No. 2, in page 2, line 31, at end insert—

'(4) References in this section to records do not include references to records which are public records within the meaning of the Public Records Act 1958.'.

Mr. Robinson: I received representations to the effect that the Bill as drafted could lead to confusion if records with which it deals are already covered by the Public Records Act 1958. I gave notice in Committee that I would table these amendments on Report. Without them, there would be unnecessary duplication of bureaucracy, which I am sure hon. Members would want to avoid and which could only lead to confusion.

I believe that public records are adequately protected without providing the Railway Heritage Committee with the power to designate them. I am pleased that the committee agrees with that proposition, and I urge the House to support the amendments, which are purely technical.

Mr. Michael Stern (Bristol, North–West): Will my hon. Friend explain briefly the sort of records that would not be designated? I do not object to the amendments—he flagged the issue in Committee—but it would be helpful to have one or two examples of the type of record involved.

Mr. Robinson: We are talking about things that are a matter of public record and which are therefore classified as public records. There are a host of them, but I do not have a specific example in mind. The point is that the power to designate already exists, so to write that power into the Bill would simply provide two systems of designation whereas only one is needed.

The Minister of State, Department of National Heritage (Mr. Iain Sproat): The Government agree entirely with my hon. Friend and support the amendment.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendment made: No. 2, in page 2, line 31, at end insert—

'(4) References in this section to records do not include references to records which are public records within the meaning of the Public Records Act 1958.'.—*[Mr. Mark Robinson.]*

Order for Third Reading read.

1.16 pm

Mr. Mark Robinson: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I begin by thanking all those who have helped to bring the Bill to Third Reading. I especially thank my hon. Friend the Minister for Railways and Roads for his support and advice. He has explained why he is unable to be here this afternoon, but the Government are well represented by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department of National Heritage, whose Department has an interest in the Bill.

It is also appropriate to mention Sir Gordon Higginson, the chairman of the Railway Heritage Committee, his colleagues on that committee, and the British Railways Board, because they, too, have been instrumental in supporting the Bill. Indeed, the Bill's success in progressing towards the statute book required all-party consensus, and I am grateful to hon. Members on both sides of the House who served on the Standing Committee and who brought with them a wide range of specialist interest in, and knowledge of, our railways.

My task was not as difficult as that described by F. S. Williams, a Nottinghamshire clergyman, in his book entitled "Our Iron Roads", which was published in the 1870s and republished 100 years later. In it, he describes the tortuous business of getting on the statute book legislation necessary to build our railways, a process that has been reflected in the Channel Tunnel Rail Link Bill. My Bill has had a relatively smooth passage, for which I am grateful. I know that people interested in the railways are equally appreciative.

I shall deal now with the substance of the Bill. It will ensure that railway artefacts and records of historic interest continue to be preserved for posterity. It will strengthen the position of the Railway Heritage Committee, which was set up under the Railways Act 1993, by bringing items now in the private sector back within its remit. Previous legislation had been confined to public sector bodies, which would be virtually meaningless post privatisation.

There has for a long time been all-party support for the aim of preserving the railway heritage of the nation. Section 144 of the Transport Act 1968 transferred responsibility for the British Railways Board's historical artefacts and certain of its records to the Department of Education and Science. In 1975, the national railway museum was established in York. I am sure that the hon. Member for York (Mr. Bayley) and my hon. Friend the Minister would wish to join me in praising the excellent work that the museum has done since then. Railway heritage was taken into account in the Railways Act 1993. I am also grateful to the hon. Member for York for his support during my work on the Bill.

Section 125 of the Railways Act 1993 extended the protection of railway artefacts and records to those owned by the new public sector bodies set up under that Act. Under that section, the Railway Heritage Committee was created in 1994, with the functions of designating artefacts and records as worthy of preservation and ensuring that they went to the appropriate collecting institutions at the end of their working lives. The committee is composed of highly respected figures in the working railway and railway heritage communities, and is chaired by the former vice-chancellor of the University of Southampton, Sir Gordon Higginson. It has already undertaken some worthwhile work, to which I pay tribute.

The committee has designated more than 7,000 engineering drawings from the Brunel era, many of which bear the signature of Isambard Kingdom Brunel. That is particularly gratifying to me, because I was born in Bristol and spent much of my childhood there. IKB is therefore a part of my culture. I am pleased to see that my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, North-West (Mr. Stern) is in the Chamber, as he and I are aware of the tremendous contribution that Brunel made to the history of that great city. In addition, I am glad that Bristol is once again governed as a city and is no longer burdened with the county of Avon. Perhaps that is a little outside the remit of the Bill.

I have been asked to give examples of items that might be designated for preservation. They include working drawings, including drawings of stations or rolling stock; publications such as rulebooks, timetables or instruction manuals; paintings of railway subjects; posters and publicity material; small artefacts marked with the monogram of the owning company, such as crockery and furniture; and items of signalling equipment, such as block instruments, signal repeaters or early electro-mechanical relays. Larger items, such as signals, lever frames and even a complete signal box could also be included. I have been told that, because it is able to be dismantled, the Forth rail bridge might be included as an artefact. Some track components, such as rail supports, chairs or point-blocking mechanisms, and of course our much treasured and valuable rolling stock, might also be designated.

The designations will not be confined to historic items; modern items such as solid state interlocking signalling systems, which have been developed in Britain and are now exported worldwide, are also worthy of consideration. Another example might be the high-speed diesel train, the InterCity 125, used on the great western line, the midland main line, the north Wales line and some cross-country services. The class 158 diesel train used on the Bristol, Frome, Yeovil and Weymouth line may also be included. That line commands great affection from my constituents in Frome, and the rail users group in Frome is anxious that it should continue to operate successfully. I am glad that it has been included in the franchising director's timetabling proposals.

The powers of the Railway Heritage Committee would be under threat without this Bill. As companies pass into the private sector, their historic records and artefacts cease to be covered by the committee's powers. As the flotation of Railtrack will soon be upon us—Railtrack is one of the principal owners of railway records—this is a matter of pressing concern. The problem was foreseen when the Railways Bill was in another place. Ministers undertook to cover the private sector through a voluntary scheme, but it was later found that that was not a workable option. That is why I am now promoting this Bill. It will ensure the protection of those artefacts and records which leave the protection of section 125 of the Railways Act 1993 as their owners are privatised.

The Bill deals with artefacts and records. There was considerable discussion in Committee about the precise meaning of "artefact" and whether it included buildings but, of course, buildings and permanent structures are protected by planning legislation. A good example of that is the grade I listed engine sheds at Bristol Temple Meads. Many hon. Members, notably the hon. Member for West Bromwich, East (Mr. Snape), will be aware of the Railway Heritage Trust's excellent work in funding and carrying out preservation work on those engine sheds.

There is an issue concerning buildings. In Committee, the hon. Member for West Bromwich, East raised the matter of lottery funding for railway buildings, which is also a matter of some concern to me. A large number of railway buildings and structures of heritage interest will pass into private sector ownership when Railtrack is floated. The buildings are highly diverse. They range from Brunel's train sheds at Bristol to the Birmingham New Street signal box. Whatever hon. Members' views on the desirability of preserving individual buildings—on which there has often been lively debate—it will be in the public interest as much after privatisation as before that those buildings should be conserved for future generations. However, their eligibility for funding from the national heritage memorial fund will end at flotation. That is clearly undesirable.

A number of exciting railway heritage projects could also benefit from lottery funding, but they fall outside the categories of project which may attract such funding. They include plans to set up a national railway archive. That would not necessarily be done by putting all important railway records together under one roof. It could be done by creating several regional centres. Visitors to any centre would be able to access documents held at other centres through computer links. That would be of great help and benefit to railway historians, and it could be of considerable educational benefit.

Mr. Stern: Before my hon. Friend leaves that point, I am sure that he will be aware of an exact example of what he is talking about in the application before the national heritage memorial fund for funding for a museum of the empire in the Brunel engine sheds at Temple Meads. Does he agree that that could be of great educational value outside the railway context, and should be encouraged? I am most grateful to him that the Bill will encourage that.

Mr. Robinson: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. I agree with him and support that very concept. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister of State will have listened to his words carefully.

Another problem is the drawings from the Brunel era. For their restoration to be eligible for lottery funding, the drawings need to be placed in a trust. That would make it difficult for Railtrack to obtain access to them. Although many of the drawings are in a fragile state, they are still working drawings and, as such, Railtrack is under a statutory obligation to provide copies on request to those responsible for track maintenance. As they are of considerable historical importance to the nation, it is surely not right that they should be ruled out of lottery funding on a technicality of ownership. I should be interested to hear the views of my hon. Friend the Minister of State, when he replies to the debate, on the possibility of extending the criteria for eligibility for lottery funding.

The Bill will extend the protection currently afforded to records and artefacts owned by publicly owned railway companies under the Railways Act 1993 to similar items owned by the bodies that will inherit, or have already inherited, the British Railways Board's assets under the restructuring of the railways industry as a consequence of that Act.

[Mr. Robinson]

As well as extending the class of owners to be covered by the heritage regime, the Bill makes several other improvements to existing legislation. It provides for the Railway Heritage Committee to delegate its functions to sub-committees and requires owners to furnish it with information relevant to its functions. Those changes will help it to carry on its work more quickly and effectively. Extension to private sector owners introduces several complications, but I am pleased to be able to say that they have been fully tackled in the Bill. Section 125 of the Railways Act 1993 was designed to facilitate consensual arrangements between public sector bodies. The advent of private sector owners necessitates the introduction of a clearer procedure to ensure fairness.

I shall briefly outline how the regime under the Bill would work in practice. When a body to which the Bill applies wished to dispose of a designated artefact or record, it would be required to notify the Railway Heritage Committee of the intended recipient and the terms of disposal. If the committee was unhappy with the intended recipient or the terms, it would be able to direct the owner of the item to offer it to a different person, or on different terms, or both. The owner could dispose of the item only with the committee's consent or under the terms directed by it, but the committee would need to make up its mind within six months, after which the owner could act freely. If the committee determined terms for the disposal, the person to whom the item was offered would have six months in which to act. Any disposals in respect of which the owner did not follow the committee's procedure would be void. That should act as a deterrent and reduce the likelihood of dishonest dealings. Criminal sanctions are not included in the Bill because they are inappropriate—another matter on which we touched in Committee.

The interests of the working railway need to be recognised in the heritage regime if it is to be effective. It is essential that the working railway should function in partnership with the railway heritage community, which is strong in Britain, in ensuring the preservation of historical railway artefacts and records for future generations. In my constituency, the East Somerset railway is an example of the enthusiasm of the railway heritage community. A proposal for the Somerset and Dorset Railway restoration between the towns of Radstock and Shepton Mallet, which runs through my constituency, is shortly due for consideration by the Millennium Commission. I certainly wish it well.

When an item is transferred from a private sector body to a collecting institution under the terms of a direction from the Railway Heritage Committee, the collecting institution pays market value compensation to that body. The committee would not be able to direct an owner to dispose of an item in a way different from that desired by the owner—for example, to direct him to sell when he wishes to lease or vice versa. For the further protection of owners, the committee would be required to give explicit consent to a disposal to which it does not object rather than airily waiting six months for its direction power to expire. Further, if it failed to notify owners that items in their possession had been designated, they would be free to dispose of them.

The Bill does not interfere with the day-to-day operation of the railway. It does not threaten working records and artefacts with compulsory transfer to museums. Transfers of equipment between owners covered by the Bill which, before April 1994, would have been internal British Rail transfers and disposals in accordance with transfer schemes under part II of the Railways Act 1993 would not require directions from the committee. Nor would the new regime prevent modifications to working railway artefacts or records which would extend or enhance their working lives. The paper on the committee's procedures that was circulated to members of the Standing Committee stressed that it was not the committee's view that working railway items of historical significance should be frozen on designation. They are of greater interest if they are modified in the same way as would have been the case had they not been so designated. In any event, the Bill does not give the committee any powers to restrict modifications to designated items.

I should add that I am grateful that the successor companies to British Rail have not objected to the Bill. Indeed, they have shown their support because they are represented on the Railway Heritage Committee.

The Bill would give the Secretary of State the power to give the Railway Heritage Committee guidance. Outline guidance, setting out compensation and dispute resolution arrangements and advising on the wording of directions, was circulated to members of the Standing Committee.

The Bill enjoys wide support in the railway industry and in railway heritage communities in my constituency and the country at large. I have been delighted not merely by the support that it has received, but because it received an unopposed Second Reading and has not been amended except by today's technical amendment. This is a Bill that hon. Members on both sides of the House can support, and I commend it to the House.

1.34 pm

Mr. Stern: I am grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to make a few brief comments on the Bill, as I was sorry to miss the Second Reading.

My hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Robinson) mentioned one qualification that I have for being interested in the subject—any hon. Member representing the Bristol region would be, because of the wealth of railway history and railway excellence there.

There are two other qualifications. First, several tributes have been paid during the passage of the Bill to the work done for railway heritage by the late and much lamented Robert Adley. His first seat was Bristol, North-East. On a boundary change, I inherited part of my constituency from that seat, so I can claim with great pleasure that, in speaking today for that constituency, I am in a small way carrying on the tradition.

Mr. Mark Robinson: I am delighted that my hon. Friend has mentioned Robert Adley, who was a good friend of mine. Indeed, I campaigned for him in Bristol many years ago. I mentioned his contribution on Second Reading. It is a coincidence perhaps, but his widow Jane now lives in my constituency and I know that she will be as delighted about the Bill as anyone.

Mr. Stern: I am grateful to my hon. Friend.

The other qualification is that I have the almost unique distinction in the House of representing a constituency in which fresh track has recently been laid and a fresh station built. That is sufficiently rare in the recent history of our railways, so it is worth putting on record that, with the strong support of my hon. Friend the Minister for Railways and Roads, Filton Abbey Wood station was built and opened in record time within the past few months. Fresh track had to be laid to it, and it is already up and running as part of the local railway network. That is something on which the railway industry should meditate.

The heritage to which the Bill refers does not merely go back to the original foundation of the railway. Railway heritage is not just about Brunel and the great engineers who worked around him. It is also about the continuing history of a developing industry. Indeed, that development has accelerated. Future historians of the railway will study and admire the expansion that has taken place—so far in a very modest way—and which will be encouraged by recent events, for it is as much a part of that heritage as the sheds at Bristol Temple Meads.

Mr. Robinson: When we first discussed the Bill, we debated whether it should be confined to historic records. That is why we drafted it to ensure that modern records would be included. Our railways are developing under our very eyes, which delights me. The other day, I read about a new steam engine—being developed in Switzerland—that is supposed to be more environmentally friendly than the present diesel and electric engines.

Mr. Stern: I remind my hon. Friend that development is not all one way. Recently, an experimental engine caught fire at Bristol Parkway station in my constituency. However, he is right: development is continuing.

The Bill will be useful in preserving not only our historic heritage—since the great days of iron—but our modern heritage. It will enable people to track the progress of the industry. I do not wish to challenge the Labour party in this regard because I am aware that the Bill has proceeded with all-party support and I do not want to upset that, but I shall refer to the privatisation process—something that I fully support.

Since being elected to this place in 1983, I have been a regular traveller on British Rail between London and Bristol. It has been a source of considerable regret to me that, over that period the train trip has got slower and the timetable has accommodated the increasing slowness of the trains. Between 1983 and 1996, the minimum journey time between London and Bristol Parkway has increased by one third—which is quite a lot. When I was first elected, the fastest train between London and Bristol Parkway took 59 minutes; until recently, the fastest train took one hour and 20 minutes.

I was therefore somewhat surprised when I received a letter from a constituent who asked me to deplore the fact that train travel times have increased by 15 minutes between London and Bristol Parkway since privatisation. I looked up my previous correspondence with the constituent and discovered that he has made it clear on a number of occasions that he is an active member of the Labour party. The reverse is actually the case: at that stage, there had been no change in the timetable since privatisation.

Recently, I was particularly delighted to receive a timetable from the newly privatised Great Western. For the first time since I have been a Member of Parliament—and, I believe, longer than that—the times of trains, and achieved times of trains, between London and Bristol have come down. New and more convenient trains have been timetabled and, for the first time in my memory, the journey time has been reduced. That is not the only thing that has been achieved in this area. Shortly after privatisation, Great Western announced considerably improved conditions and pay for the staff of the newly franchised railway. For the first time in my memory, improved conditions were achieved without a strike.

I ask my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome to contact the Railway Heritage Committee to ensure that we adequately preserve records, on paper, of what British Rail was achieving before privatisation—I refer to timetables, rule books and wage structures. We will then see the progress that has started with Great Western—and that will continue. We will rebuild the sort of railway that many of us believe is possible.

Mr. Robinson: I am delighted to give my hon. Friend that assurance. I have a funny feeling that a member of the Railway Heritage Committee may be listening to him right now.

Mr. Stern: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that assurance.

Mr. Patrick Thompson (Norwich, North): My hon. Friend has referred to the improved wage structures that have been introduced post franchise, post privatisation. To what extent have they been reported in local or other newspapers so that people are aware of them?

Mr. Stern: I regret that good news about the railways rarely achieves reported status. I should like to pay tribute to one of my local newspapers, however, the "Northavon Gazette", which has reported in full my comments about the improved wage structures and timetables. Nevertheless, the problem is that, after the barrage—some may say farrago—of publicity about the privatisation process, many people are still finding it difficult to believe that we are moving into an era of improved railway services for passengers and staff. I agree with my hon. Friend that we need to hammer away on those improvements to ensure that people understand the direction in which the industry is going.

That neatly brings me to my second point. As a result of boundary changes, a new area, Patchway, will be added to the Bristol, North-West constituency at the next general election. As I hope to continue to represent the constituency then, I have considered some of the problems associated with the area. I have discovered that it has its own railway station on a branch line, but that that branch line has suffered a long history of neglect in terms of the effects of timetabling. When I queried the successor to British Rail how the pattern of services has changed in recent years to accommodate local demand, I was somewhat surprised to find that, but for a couple of years back, no timetables were readily available to enable the current management to compare the services it is now offering with those on offer a few years ago. That is deplorable.

How can we expect ordinary people, parish councils and district councils to play the part open to them to help the railways to improve their service unless full, accurate

[Mr. Stern]

records are available of what was previously provided as a supposedly adequate service? They could then make a comparison. That is my second reason for welcoming my hon. Friend's Bill. I hope that it will enable students of the railway and people with an interest in the railway as a service to the public to chart progress by reference to detailed timetables and detailed usage patterns. With such information, people will be able to persuade the future, more modern management of the railway of the public demand for services, including the reintroduction of those that were once on offer. For that reason, I thoroughly commend my hon. Friend's Bill to the House.

1.48 pm

Mr. Sproat: I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Robinson) on taking the Bill thus far through Parliament. The piloting of a Private Member's Bill is made to look easy when it is done with such elegance and neatness as that displayed by my hon. Friend, but it is extremely complicated. I congratulate him on his mastery of a complex subject and on taking a necessary Bill through the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, North-West (Mr. Stern) mentioned the late Robert Adley, who was a real character in the House and who certainly knew more about the railways than anyone this side of the British Railways Board. I was glad to hear that his wife, Jane, whom I have also met, is now living in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, North-West mentioned the concept of the museum of the British empire in Bristol. It is a tremendous idea. The British empire and railways go together naturally. Not only will the empire museum be housed, if all goes well, in the old Brunel sheds, but one can hardly go anywhere in the third world or what used to be the British empire without finding old railways built in 1925 and still going strong, or old station hotels, such as that in Kuala Lumpur, resonant with imperial echoes. We now return to the Bill.

I am deputising for the Minister of State, Department of Transport. I am pleased to do so. He is an exceptionally good Minister, who has done me a good turn on a matter in which you and I, Mr. Deputy Speaker, have a common interest—the Wakefield mining museum, for which he has agreed a signpost.

I have a personal interest in this matter, because one of my predecessors as Member of Parliament for Harwich was the first person ever to be killed by a railway train, before which he was carelessly walking with a red flag when the railway was being opened—Mr. William Huskisson.

I find myself with a rather more personal interest in the Bill than I had first expected. As a boy, I used to hold out the hoop at railway stations. Hon. Members may remember that one put one's hand through the hoop and the driver caught it. I went out of my way to collect the hoop in the old metal tablet.

It is especially on behalf of the Department of National Heritage that I am grateful to be here because, as the Minister responsible for the national railway museum, I am pleased to speak for a measure that will ensure that the museum remains a haven of excellence and international repute in the conservation of railway heritage.

I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome about the museum's work. In addition to the splendour of Queen Adelaide's coach, built in 1842, and the famous Mallard—I often saw it as a boy, and travelled in the train pulled by the old streamliner—which held the world steam record, there are many fascinating engineering drawings and artefacts, such as station plates.

One of the difficult aspects of working at the Department of National Heritage is that some people assume that heritage is a dry matter, concerned with the past and not remotely concerned with the future. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, North-West correctly said that that is very far from the case, and indicated a few ways in which we should be keeping up with artefacts, as it were, that are being created today that would be valuable in future.

There are few areas in which the misconception of dry and dusty matter is more of a misconception than railway heritage. Historic railway records can be surprisingly relevant to the running of the railway today. I understand that the Brunel era drawings, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome alluded, are still used as working drawings. I also noted the extraordinary story in *The Times* saying that steam engines are more environmentally friendly than diesel. That shows that there is more than heritage interest in what my hon. Friend proposes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome mentioned the lottery and the national heritage memorial fund. Of course the scope of the Bill does not extend to increasing the criteria on the basis of which lottery funding can be delivered, but my Department does intend, at a suitable opportunity and as soon as possible, to introduce legislation to extend the powers of the national heritage memorial fund regarding the lottery to make a wider range of projects and recipients eligible. That could encompass those to which my hon. Friend alluded.

I wholeheartedly join my hon. Friend in applauding the work of the Railway Heritage Committee. It is an independent committee, under the chairmanship of Sir Gordon Higginson, and consists of other eminent persons from the Railway Heritage Movement and the railway industry. It was set up under the Railways Act 1993 to ensure that railway artefacts and records of historic significance go to the appropriate collecting institution at the end of their useful lives and become available to a wider public. In addition to the designations that my hon. Friend mentioned, I understand that the Railway Heritage Committee has done much work on setting criteria for future designations and directions, which have been pored over in Committee.

The committee's powers under the 1993 Act extended to the British Railways Board and the new public sector bodies that were to be created under the restructuring process. Now many of the board's successors are entering the private sector and so leaving the scope of existing provisions, which necessitates new arrangements.

The committee as a whole, and its members as individuals, welcome the Bill. I understand that they have been consulted and their views carefully considered throughout the drafting process. In particular, the head of the national railway museum, Mr. Andrew Scott, who is a member of the committee, strongly welcomes the

provisions in the Bill as they will help to ensure that the museum's leading role in the preservation of important historical railway material will continue.

I am pleased that the Bill recognises the need to balance the interests of the railway heritage community and the railway industry. That should enable all parties to work co-operatively to ensure that primary sources for future historians are not lost.

As my hon. Friend has noted, the Bill provides for the Secretary of State to issue guidance to the committee. I am sure that it would be helpful to the House if I explained the purpose of the guidance. Private sector owners of designated records and artefacts must have a right to compensation at market value if the committee directs disposal of those items. It is quite likely that, in many cases, the owners will waive that right in the interests of their public image, but they must have that right.

On the other hand, the British Railways Board is happy to continue to transfer records and artefacts to the national railway museum, the Public Record Office, the Scottish Record Office and other collecting institutions free or for a nominal charge.

It would be wrong to obstruct that mutually beneficial arrangement between the board and the collecting institutions, but as hon. Members will be aware we could hardly make one provision for the public sector and another for the private sector in the Bill. The guidance will deal with that problem.

Hon. Members may be wondering how the market value compensation for private sector owners will be calculated. That will be done by agreement between the owner and the collecting institution. Of course, there will be disagreements from time to time. The outline guidance provides for recourse to arbitration in that event. If the parties failed to agree on an arbiter, the president of the Institute of Arbiters will be asked to choose one. The guidance will also assist the committee in drafting directions.

I must stress that we have absolutely no intention of undermining the committee's independence by giving guidance on designation or direction criteria, or on particular designations or directions. Even if the Secretary of State were to give such guidance, the committee would merely be obliged to have regard to it, not to follow it. I can confirm that the guidance will be published and that copies will be placed in the Library of the House.

I believe that my hon. Friend's Bill will help significantly in the preservation of railway artefacts and records and so will benefit railway industry and railway heritage interests and the public. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

Energy Conservation Bill

As amended (in the Standing Committee), considered.
Bill reported, without amendment.
Order for Third Reading read.

1.57 pm

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I am pleased to have brought the Bill to its Report and Third Reading. I pay tribute to hon. Members on both sides of the House who have sponsored and supported the Bill. I thank the Minister, his civil servants and the staff of the Association for the Conservation of Energy, which has been instrumental in bringing not only this Bill before the House, but the Home Energy Conservation Bill—now an Act—last year.

In many ways this Bill shares the same objectives as the Home Energy Conservation Act. It fills an important omission in that Act which we did not realise existed at the time. I shall briefly remind the House of the shared objectives. The first is to try to make inroads into the backlog of fuel poverty that existed in the United Kingdom. It is now clearly recognised that, as a nation, we incur more than £1 billion of wasted energy bills through fuel-inefficient housing. It affects some 2.5 million households and claims 50,000 avoidable winter deaths from fuel poverty.

The second objective relates to the impact on the health of those who do not die, but continue to live in fuel-inefficient housing. Newark and Sherwood local authority, which is regarded as one of the pioneers in this respect, has carried out a survey of what, over 20 years, an energy conservation programme would mean in terms of other associated local health costs. It estimates that it would save about £4 million in reduced local health service costs.

The third objective of a serious and comprehensive energy conservation programme, which would be welcome in the House and the country, is to tackle atmospheric pollution. We know already that carbon dioxide emissions from domestic properties amount to 25 per cent. of the country's total emissions, nitrous oxide emissions amount to 14 per cent. and sulphur dioxide emissions account for almost 30 per cent. of total emissions. Making inroads into reducing those emissions would make important contributions on a wider scale to the Government's energy conservation programme. All those objectives are entirely laudable, and I hope do not divide the House in any way.

The problem with last year's Act was that, after it had passed all its stages, we discovered that there was a serious omission: it fails to include in the responsibilities given to local authorities a responsibility to monitor houses in multiple occupation. To put that in context, the Department of the Environment issued a press release in November which pointed out that there were 638,000 houses in multiple occupation in England alone. If one adds to that the number of similar properties in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, one gets some idea of the proportion of properties in which some of the most serious inroads need to be made to raise standards of energy efficiency.

The omission in last year's Act left local authorities in a strange position. Not only did we give them no direct mandate to produce reports as part of their energy

[Mr. Alan Simpson]

efficiency monitoring schemes, we may well have left them in a position where to do so would have been ultra vires. The Bill's main intention is to try to close that gap and give local authorities a specific remit to monitor houses in multiple occupation and be able to issue separate reports that might specifically address the conditions in such properties.

I am sure that most hon. Members, as well as large sections of the population, are aware that the most serious examples of fuel inefficiency are found in houses in multiple occupation. We are talking not about respectable hotels but many properties that count among the most undesirable, which have been poorly converted, packed with many households to make whatever money possible and which are certainly not energy efficient houses that reduce the fuel bills of the poor.

The Bill will not pursue the completion of an energy savings scheme; it is about making a start and finding a basis on which we can begin as a society to take energy saving more seriously. I remember being told that if one wants to change a situation, one must first understand it. The Bill is about an understanding and a monitoring of conditions in houses in multiple occupation.

If the Bill's monitoring and reports come back to the House and assist us either nationally or locally in pursuing energy conservation measures that raise the standards of energy efficiency in our homes, it will have all sorts of additional practical benefits.

One benefit is the creation of jobs. The Association for the Conservation of Energy calculates that, if we as a society were serious about raising the standards of home energy efficiency, over 15 years we could generate 500,000 job years, reducing pollution, reducing energy bills and improving our health in the process. I am sure that every hon. Member subscribes to those objectives.

I hope that by passing the Bill, the House will give a clear message. The measure is welcomed and wanted by local authorities. I hope that it will have the full endorsement not only of the House, but of the public as a whole. I am pleased to commend the Bill on Third Reading.

2.4 pm

Mr. Patrick Thompson (Norwich, North): I am grateful for the opportunity to support the hon. Member for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson) and his Energy Conservation Bill. I intend to speak briefly, not least because I support the Journalistic Corrupt Practices Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Stamford and Spalding (Mr. Davies), and I would not want to deprive him of the opportunity to make the case for his Bill, about which I am also enthusiastic.

I am, of course, aware that the Energy Conservation Bill would extend the Home Energy Conservation Act 1995 to houses in multiple occupation. I do not intend to add anything to the remarks made, clearly and concisely, by the hon. Member for Nottingham, South. However, I can say, as I am sure hon. Members will agree, that the Bill will provide benefits in our constituencies. In Norwich, North, there are many houses in multiple occupation of the type that have just been described. Clearly, the Bill is right and it is good that it has all-party support. I am obviously delighted that it has the support of the Government in the form of my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State.

My reason for being here is not just that I happen to be free from constituency engagements this Friday, but because of my commitment over the years to energy conservation measures. I am sure that the hon. Member for Nottingham, South will agree that there is a long history of energy conservation Bills. Although I have been involved in many of them, signed early-day motions, spoken on Second Reading and so on, I find that, over 12 or 13 years, I have become quite confused about which measure was which. However, there is a definite history of such Bills and I have always tried to support them in terms of the principle of energy conservation.

As the hon. Member for Nottingham, South will be aware—I hope that this is not a controversial point—many of the Bills have fallen at one hurdle or another. One Bill was about the reduction of VAT on building products and as I understand it—I have not studied the matter in great detail—the problem was the European Community. Far be it from me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to introduce European issues at this stage. However, there were snags and that is why this Bill is not the same as the Energy-Saving Materials (Rates of Value Added Tax) Bill, which the hon. Gentleman introduced in the previous Session.

Other energy conservation Bills have fallen because of their sheer cost, as the Government understand it. I think that I am right in saying that there was a problem about the sheer cost of the energy audit that local authorities were required to carry out under some of the previous Bills. I am therefore delighted that the Government support this Bill, which is very good news.

My enthusiasm for energy conservation stems partly from my background as a physicist. Anyone who has studied and taught physics for 23 years is hardly likely not to think about the conservation of energy all the time. Whenever the subject comes up, I leap up to say something about it. The whole question of energy efficiency and energy conservation must be on the Government's mind all the time. If my hon. Friend the Minister is not already enthusiastic about the subject, I hope that he and his ministerial colleagues will become ever more enthusiastic about it, because it is important for two reasons.

The first reason, which has already been explained by the hon. Member for Nottingham, South, is the difficulty people have in paying for energy costs. In my constituency, many people have difficulty in paying their energy bills. The issue comes before the House on and off, when we debate cold weather payments, VAT on fuel, standing charges, fuel bills and so on. We all get correspondence on those subjects. So if by improving energy efficiency and encouraging better projects for insulating homes we can help people pay their energy bills, that must be worth while.

I shall not speak at length on that subject, but it is one reason why I have tried hard to support the energy conservation measures that come before us. In my constituency, I have supported initiatives such as the home energy efficiency scheme. No doubt many other hon. Members have done the same. I seem to remember putting on a cap and a suitable overall to hammer in bits of insulation alongside doors and windows, and having

my photograph in the local paper to record the occasion. Such initiatives are good. We have all been involved in them, and we want to continue to encourage them.

Another reason why I support such measures so strongly, including the Bill before us, although it is a detailed technical measure, is the overriding issue that must be important to a scientist—global warming. Hon. Members who have introduced energy conservation measures in the House or who, in the case of the Government, have supported such measures and produced their own initiatives, have always had those important questions in the back of their mind.

In my city of Norwich, we have the university of East Anglia, which has a worldwide reputation for studying subjects such as global warming, the possible rise in sea levels, climatic change, pollution and other such important issues. If any of the energy conservation measures can help to reduce carbon dioxide levels and diminish climate change and global warming, it must be worthy of debate.

In the days before the Jopling reforms, we used to debate such matters in the early hours of the morning. I remember having a one-and-a-half-hour debate on global warming in one of the Consolidated Fund debates, but that has all changed now. None the less, all power to the elbow of those who support energy conservation and efficiency. I am delighted to support the Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Nottingham, South. His initiative needs no further commendation of mine.

2.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment (Mr. James Clappison): I am pleased to be able to welcome the Bill. It is a worthwhile measure, and the hon. Member for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson) has performed a service in using it to deal with energy efficiency in houses in multiple occupation. For the reasons that he explained, the Bill represents an important addition to last year's legislation.

Having recently served on the Committee on the Housing Bill, which spent some time talking about houses in multiple occupation, I was struck both in the debates on the Bill and in reading the representations that I received earlier from local authorities, by the number of houses in multiple occupation in this country, and by the number of people for whom they provide homes. The hon. Gentleman said that there were 638,000 such properties, and I agree that that is the size of the sector. Such houses provide homes for many of our fellow citizens so, for the reasons that the hon. Gentleman gave, it is entirely appropriate that energy conservation should be extended to them.

I am sure that the House will be grateful to the hon. Gentleman for having used the opportunity to promote the issue. I also appreciate what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Mr. Thompson), especially on two scores. First, I was impressed by the fact that my hon. Friend managed to bring Europe into the debate. Europe seems to be a ubiquitous topic at the moment. Earlier today I addressed the House on the subject of the Noise Bill, and I found that Europe reared its head then, too. We had to debate whether noise could cross European boundaries, and there were calls for a European policy, although I am not sure whether those were entirely serious. And here Europe is, cropping up again.

The important things that my hon. Friend said were about his enthusiasm for energy conservation. I can certainly offer him the Government's wholehearted commitment to and enthusiasm for energy conservation and measures to promote it, both in the domestic sector and more widely among businesses and other energy users. It is a very important subject.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North said, perhaps modestly, he was able to speak from the position of someone who has scientific experience. He knows of the important linkages between energy conservation and environmental benefits, and he is familiar with the important issues of climate change and emissions.

It is important to make the straightforward linkage, which the hon. Member for Nottingham, South made, between energy conservation and the environment, and between energy conservation and financial benefits. We are concerned about financial benefits for householders, of course, but we are also concerned about financial benefits for businesses.

I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North that, although I cannot match his expertise on the subject, I certainly share his enthusiasm for it. The Government have a wide-ranging programme to promote energy efficiency and energy conservation in the domestic and business sectors, and he will be particularly pleased to learn—if he does not already know—that the Government have recently launched a pack to bring the subject to schoolchildren's attention, helping to educate them on the importance of energy conservation and the links between energy conservation and environmental change. It is an important subject, and he is entirely right to insist on the need for enthusiasm and the need to look to the future.

This is worthwhile measure. I welcome it for the reasons given by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North and by the hon. Member for Nottingham, South. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

Journalistic Corrupt Practices Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

2.15 pm

Mr. Quentin Davies (Stamford and Spalding): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I was delighted, when I introduced my Bill under the ten-minute rule a few weeks ago, that the House agreed to allow it to proceed to a Second Reading. I am very pleased to take it to a further stage.

My Bill is not a privacy Bill, although I disguise from no one the fact that, since I was elected as a Member of Parliament in 1987, I have been sympathetic to measures taken by hon. Members on both sides of the House to introduce a privacy Bill. An inherent part of the concept of a free society is that people should be able to enjoy an element of genuine privacy in their private lives and that there should be a sphere that is protected from unwanted intrusion from the media and from outsiders.

My Bill has two purposes. The first is to make it an offence for media representatives to purchase private information relating to third parties—to corrupt acquaintances, friends, employers, employees, tenants or other potential informants—when there is no public interest, as defined in the Bill, and to publish that information.

My Bill's second purpose, which is of course linked to its first, relates to a corrupt and undesirable practice. My Bill would make it a criminal offence to reach financial arrangements with witnesses or potential witnesses in criminal trials. It would be an aggravated offence to reach financial arrangements with witnesses in criminal trials when those arrangements were contingent on a guilty verdict being returned.

There is surely no way in which a witness can be genuinely objective in the witness box—therefore, justice cannot be done—if that witness knows that the consequence of his evidence or the evidence given by other witnesses, who may also have been corrupted, might be a guilty verdict, so he stands to make a substantial amount of money. We know that the amount of money that has passed in some cases—such as the West case, in which this phenomenon has arisen—has been in substantial multiples of tens of thousands of pounds.

In those circumstances, it is not possible for a witness to put out of his mind the enormous financial consequences of the verdict that will be returned. Therefore, the witness cannot possibly be genuinely objective in his or her evidence.

Mr. Patrick Thompson (Norwich, North): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I realise that time is short, but the Chamber is nearly empty. Is my hon. Friend aware of the concern—certainly among my constituents and, I suspect, among the public as a whole—about the lowering of standards in the tabloid newspapers in recent years? Does he realise how much anger and potential support there is for his proposals?

Mr. Davies: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for his expression of support. I received scores of letters from the public at large, not only from my constituents, when I introduced the Bill. I do not recall receiving any letters opposing my initiative, although I did have one or two slightly angry conversations with editors of tabloid newspapers. One of them took place at a private reception and it would be invidious to mention the editor's name, although he is a well-known figure. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his testimony to the support that my initiative has—for good reason, I believe—encountered.

As my hon. Friend points out, a debate on the boundary between liberty and licence in a free society has been opened by the tabloid press in the past few years. I have not always lived in a free society, as I lived in Moscow for three years as second secretary at the British embassy there. That was 20 years ago, at the height of the Brezhnev regime. It was anything but a free society, but I had the good luck to have diplomatic immunity and was spared some of the more obvious threats that the ordinary Soviet man or woman would have faced had he or she displayed any political independence or freedom of thought.

Nevertheless, even as a British diplomat, for three years I got used to knowing that I would be followed everywhere I went, in a car if I was in a car or by several people if I was on foot. Indeed, if I was on foot, I would be followed by several people. I was followed to every restaurant table at which I might sit, and I knew that every hotel room and every flat that I visited would be bugged. It became second nature, but I took it for granted that, when I came back to this country, I would no longer be subject to such a regime.

I was recently reminded, forcibly and uncomfortably, of my days in the Soviet Union, as it then was, when I read in the tabloids about one of our colleagues who was apparently followed by employees of the *Daily Mirror*. He was followed from the House to his home, from his home to an airport, from the airport to a hotel and from the hotel to the beach. Photographs were surreptitiously taken of him, of the bedroom in which he stayed and of the person with him, who was in no sense a public figure and certainly did not deserve to have her name or face dragged into the story, but there is no protection against that.

I understand that the Government are favourably considering legislating against stalking. We believe that stalking is a way of one individual harassing another in a manner that is inconsistent with the dignity, freedom and independence that all individuals should enjoy in a free society. However, no one so far seems to have thought it at all unreasonable that individuals should be harassed by the tabloid press.

At issue is not only the harassment itself, but—this is the point of the Bill—the methods used to obtain information for sensational articles. Those methods extend beyond surveillance—there have been cases of individuals, including Members of Parliament, having their telephone bugged, of documents being purloined and of people being corrupted. There have been extremely unpleasant instances of people making enormous sums of money by selling stories to the tabloids, about how they allegedly slept with so and so, or by providing other sensational information about someone's medical, sexual or emotional history.

That is not only degrading, but poses exactly the same threat to the liberty of the subject as the activities of the secret police, activities that we supposed were associated with totalitarian societies.

The habit of corruption is dangerous, not only because it is unacceptable when the objective is to find out personal information with a view to making money by its publication, but because it is only a small step—a step that will become almost imperceptible when one is offering to corrupt people on the scale that the tabloid press regularly does—to inventing the information. A colleague in the House—this has undoubtedly happened also to many private citizens—was inveigled into a situation that otherwise would not have arisen, as a result of somebody who was receiving a large amount of money from the tabloid press.

I have a copy of the latest report of the Press Complaints Commission, from the first quarter of this year. It deals with the complaint of Miss Selina Scott against the *News of the World*. It is clear that that newspaper was prepared to pay someone to allege that he had had a sexual relationship with Miss Scott, when there was clearly no truth in the allegation. The man concerned was a weird misfit who had a passing acquaintance with Miss Scott, who had been nice enough, unfortunately, to write to congratulate him on his engagement. On the basis of that letter and no other evidence, the man was able to make a large amount of money by selling an entirely untrue and spurious story.

Such allegations are now the daily stuff which certain sections of Fleet street, or should I say Wapping, live off. We should not allow the situation to continue. There must be a proper balance between the liberty of the subject and the freedom of expression of the press, a freedom that we all want the fourth estate to continue to enjoy.

If the balance is not struck naturally as a result of sensible and responsible behaviour by all citizens—including those who run the tabloid press—and if those who run the tabloid press feel that there is no countervailing pressure on them to decide against the commercial inducement to produce ever-more sensational stories to increase their readership and market share, it must be for the House to establish where the proper balance should lie. The House must establish clear rules of the game, and it is more than time that we considered doing exactly that.

2.26 pm

The Minister of State, Department of National Heritage (Mr. Iain Sproat): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stamford and Spalding (Mr. Davies) on raising this subject. My congratulations are tempered only by the thought that we simply do not have enough time on this occasion to air the subject to the extent that it deserves, and I very much hope that my hon. Friend—and perhaps the Government—will find another opportunity to look at the matter. It is undoubtedly true that, if democracy is to flourish, there must be a balance between the rights of individuals to go about their lawful procedures and the right of the press to hound them to try to find out not only what they have done, but—as my hon. Friend mentioned in the dreadful case of Selina Scott—what they have not done.

With regard to the Selina Scott case, my hon. Friend did not mention something that struck me most forcibly. Not only was a false story printed against her, and not only was no proper checking done to ensure that the story was accurate, but when her complaint was upheld—as I understand it—she was told that, as she had not lost any money as a result of the story, nothing further could be done. It is as if Shakespeare had never written:

"Who steals my purse, steals trash."

That was many hundreds of years ago, yet it still applies today.

An individual was defamed, although the allegations could have been looked at thoroughly. The man's character could have been shown by the fact that the letter purporting to be a love letter from Selina Scott was actually congratulating him on his engagement. One gasps that anyone should do such things and that there should be no remedy. My hon. Friend is right to say that we should examine such matters seriously. Such practices corrupt and degrade democracy and degrade individuals. It gives the press too much power if journalists believe that they can indulge in such practices and get away with it.

I hope that my hon. Friend will return to the subject and that we have a proper opportunity to debate the rights and wrongs of it. The press should be protected in doing what it ought to do, but it should not be allowed to get away with stories such as the ones about Selina Scott or about my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Mr. Allason), who has been subject in successive days to front-page attacks by the *Daily Mirror*, which followed him about in exactly the way that my hon. Friend the Member for Stamford and Spalding said that the secret police did to him when he was in Moscow.

It is no defence to say that because it was done not for the secret police, but for a newspaper, such subterfuge, deceit and following of individuals can be justified.

It being half-past Two o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed upon Friday 12 July.

Remaining Private Members' Bills

REGISTRATION OF DOMICILIARY CARE AGENCIES BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 12 July.

WATER CHARGES (AMENDMENT) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 12 July.

HOUSE OF COMMONS (REFORM) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 12 July.

STALKING BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 12 July.

Ms Janet Anderson (Rossendale and Darwen): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Could you tell the House whether a request has been received to make a statement on the need to introduce a criminal offence of stalking? Now that the Government have objected to my Bill, the victims of stalking will have to wait at least another year to be put out of their misery.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Geoffrey Lofthouse): I am not aware that any request has been made to make a statement.

SEXUAL OFFENCES AGAINST CHILDREN (REGISTERS OF OFFENDERS) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 12 July.

DANGEROUS DOGS (AMENDMENT) BILL [*LORDS*]

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 21 June.

CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE BILL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Second Reading [26 April].

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Not moved.

ADOPTION LEAVE ARRANGEMENTS BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 12 July.

PROTECTION OF PRIVACY (No. 2) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Not moved.

DISABLED PERSONS (SERVICES, CONSULTATION AND REPRESENTATION) IMPLEMENTATION BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 12 July.

REGULATION OF FUNDING OF POLITICAL PARTIES

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Second Reading [19 April].

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate further adjourned till Friday 12 July.

REGULATION OF DIET INDUSTRY BILL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Second Reading [22 March].

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate further adjourned till Friday 12 July.

ACCESS TO THE COUNTRYSIDE BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 12 July.

WELFARE OF BROILER CHICKENS BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 12 July.

HOSTAGE RECOVERY BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 12 July.

FREEZING OF HUMAN EMBRYOS BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Not moved.

TOBACCO (PROTECTION OF CHILDREN AND RESTRICTION OF PROMOTION) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 12 July.

LOCAL AUTHORITIES (TRADING AND COMPETITION POWERS) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 12 July.

CIVIL AVIATION (AMENDMENT) BILL [*LORDS*]

Read a Second time.

Motion made, and Question, That the Bill be committed to a Committee of the whole House—*[Mr. Colvin]—put and negatived.*

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *thereupon declared that the Bill stood committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 61 (Committal of Bills).*

HONG KONG (WAR WIVES AND WIDOWS) BILL

Read a Second time.

Motion made, and Question, That the Bill be committed to a Committee of the whole House—*[Mr. Cyril D. Townsend]—put and negatived.*

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *thereupon declared that the Bill stood committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 61 (Committal of Bills).*

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE.

Ordered,

That—

(1) at the sitting on Tuesday 14th May Standing Orders Nos. 14B (Proceedings under an Act or on European Community documents) and 15 (Delegated legislation (negative procedure)) shall apply to the Motions in the name of Mr. Tony Blair relating to Education; and

(2) at any one sitting of the House the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to the civil service not later than three hours after their commencement or Seven o'clock, whichever is the later.—*[Mr. Bates.]*

United Nations

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Bates.]*

2.35 pm

Mr. Cyril D. Townsend (Bexleyheath): I am delighted to have the opportunity to raise the important subject of Britain and the United Nations. This debate follows that which I was lucky enough to have the chance to initiate on 4 December 1992 on the UN, and several Adjournment debates on the then obscure subject of UN peacekeeping. I am chairman of the United Nations parliamentary group. I have always been proud of the United Kingdom's contribution to the work of the UN from its birth, and of our special place on the UN Security Council.

The United Kingdom is in a special and privileged position in the UN. It therefore behoves us from time to time to give a lead to that body. My theme this afternoon is that this is just such a time. I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Minister of State will be replying to the debate, and the House will be looking for some pragmatic, well-considered Government proposals to tackle the many, various and well-known problems on which I shall briefly touch.

To be blunt, the United Nations is facing the greatest crisis in its 50-year history. I shall let Sir David Hannay, an outstanding former permanent ambassador to the UN, set the scene. He wrote recently:

"The UN of 1997 will be in less good shape than it was at the beginning of the current five-year mandate in 1992. Gone the confidence and optimism exuded by the statement adopted by the Heads of State and Government of the members of the Security Council at their first ever summit-level meeting a month after Boutros-Ghali took office. Bosnia, Somalia and Rwanda have taken the shine off the successes in Namibia, the Gulf, Cambodia and elsewhere. Tales of waste, duplication and incompetence in the Secretariat and UN agencies have undermined public support for the organisation."

I agree with those pertinent remarks, and I draw attention to the fact that it was the Government that set up the special Security Council meeting to consider for the first time at summit level how the UN should best proceed. The truth is that, at the end of this troubled and turbulent century, we need the UN, based on its widely praised charter, more than ever before.

At present, some 17 peacekeeping operations are under the auspices of the UN. National Governments blithely assume that the UN will be around to pick up the pieces after other attempts have failed. When NATO leaves Bosnia, or non-governmental organisations get kicked out of other countries, when chaos, anarchy, despair and degradation stalk the land, the cry will continue to go up for the UN to move in, take over and supply the instant solutions.

I should like the UN to be able to assume a greater importance in world affairs, to be given greater authority to prevent conflicts in places such as Burundi and Macedonia, to strengthen further human rights, in particular those of refugees, and to be better placed to struggle against suffocating poverty and the environmental destruction all around the globe.

I hope that the Minister will join me in celebrating the UN's many and often largely taken for granted successes. I hope that he will join me in paying tribute to the success of the 50th anniversary celebrations—an event so well organised by the United Nations Association in this country that I do not believe any other country did better—and recognise the Government's role in mobilising public support for an enhanced UN as we move into the 21st century.

Only through a thorough and sustained process of reform can the recent decline of UN standing be reversed. Following "An Agenda for Peace"—yes, I know it is the Minister's bedside reading—the Secretary-General has carried out a considerable measure of reform. There have been new appointments, and, as requested by the United States, there is now an office of internal oversight.

Every hon. Member will welcome the slimming down of the UN bureaucracy, while agreeing that there is more to be done. My hunch is that there are still too many committees and too much international bureaucracy and waste. When it comes to promotions, I should like greater emphasis to be placed on merit and less on nationality. The UN bureaucracy has improved, but it is still not up to the required standard. There may be scope for removing one UN agency altogether, but it would be foolish to talk of closing down several.

My attention has been drawn to a reply that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister gave in the house. He said:

"By reform, I mean not just a reform of procedures but the abolition of many United Nations bodies that no longer serve a useful purpose."—[*Official Report*, 30 January 1996; Vol. 270, c. 772.]

His predecessor was got at by Ronald Reagan and the Heritage Foundation. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will be able to hold his own under any such pressures in the future.

Before the Secretary-General was first elected, he said that would carry on for only one term. He would be wise to keep to that, and he would set a good precedent. Does my right hon. Friend the Minister care to comment on that? Has he any ideas as to future candidates whom the British Government might want to back? Have we started discussing the matter with the European Union and within the Commonwealth?

The idea of a deputy has also been suggested. While the Secretary-General would continue to handle international crises—the high-wire act—and run the peacekeeping operations throughout the world, his deputy would be shaking up and slimming down the bureaucracy and working out the new priorities. In naval parlance, it is called running a tight ship. Does that idea have my right hon. Friend's support? It appears to have the Prime Minister's, if he wants any guidance on the matter.

At the heart of my remarks must be the serious financial crisis facing the UN. There have been a number of such crises before—I feel that I have been around that course more than once—but this time the situation seems extremely serious. There have been loud and clear warnings for many months, yet no proper action commensurate with the great size of the problem has been taken by the United Nations' 185 member states.

I cannot believe that the UN will be allowed to close its doors—if it did so, a new and similar international organisation would at once have to be constructed—yet it is now a fact that the UN could be completely out of cash by the end of this year.

The present financial crisis is crippling the United Nations and preventing it from carrying out essential tasks. Already, diplomatic initiatives for peace cannot

proceed, human rights monitors cannot be deployed, and vital emergency humanitarian efforts are being held up. This is tragic. What a way to run our world.

To keep the lights on, the UN's senior figures are putting aside important matters as they desperately try to raise funds. They are hindered by two basic problems: the UN has only puny financial reserves at the best of times, and it has not been permitted to borrow, even for a few weeks.

The Secretary-General has been forced to use money in the UN's peacekeeping budget to pay for its day-to-day running costs. What will happen if a large peacekeeping force is required urgently and totally unexpectedly? There must be the possibility of a small regional problem flaring up out of control because no peacekeeping force is dispatched at the crucial early stages.

Hon. Members know that the world's richest country—which, in my view, is wrongly and undeservedly the host to the UN headquarters—is pushing the UN to the brink of disaster. The United States of America gains massive benefits from the location of the UN in New York, but it owes the UN approximately $1.6 billion, and it is about to cut its contribution to peacekeeping from 31.5 per cent. to 25 per cent of the cost. That is disgraceful behaviour by a permanent member of the Security Council, which has more influence over the work of the UN than any other country.

According to the Global Policy Forum, an organisation located in New York, the current United States share of the regular UN budget—£321 million—is only one fiftieth of 1 per cent. of federal spending, and less than 1 per cent. of New York city's annual outlays. Important countries such as Russia and Ukraine have not paid their full dues because of their internal financial difficulties—but at least they are trying to catch up.

I turn to the European Union to take the initiative. The Minister is not as enthusiastic as I would like him to be for joint EU action in foreign policy. However, the EU countries—which contain two permanent members of the Security Council—should push forward their proposals for solving the crisis. Together, the EU countries pay more than half the funds received by the UN, and last year they strongly and correctly criticised America during the appropriate debate in the General Assembly. It is right that member countries that do not pay their contribution should not have a vote at the UN, as the Foreign Secretary has most effectively pointed out.

The European Union should appeal to all member states that have not yet fully paid their assessments to do so without delay. They should appeal to those countries that enjoy strong economies to make emergency payments to help existing UN debts. They should call for an emergency meeting of the General Assembly, and highlight the very real dangers to world peace and security if the UN is forced dramatically to curtail its activities.

I believe that 1998 marks the 50th anniversary of the declaration of human rights. How will the Government celebrate the anniversary and help build on the declarations's achievements? Perhaps a committee along the lines of the 50th anniversary committee is called for, under a chairman with a legal background. What funding will be made available by the Foreign Office? Perhaps the Minister could write to me with his considered views on this topic in due course.

Conflict prevention is a key subject, and I have already made a passing reference to it. How can we give a higher priority to it in the future? There have been important advances that have saved lives, time and trouble later. I welcome the start that the international community has made in relation to war crimes. Over the long term, more alleged war criminals must be brought to justice, and clear standards of international behaviour must be established.

I have taken up much of the time of the House in Adjournment debates on the obvious need for Britain to rejoin the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. The Government have behaved badly, and there is widespread support in the House for our return to UNESCO. Our friends in the Commonwealth do not understand why we do not come back in and stand up for British interests and for their interests.

When we were a member, in any one year we earned more money for UNESCO than we put into it. We are letting down many British scientific, educational and cultural organisations. If we wish to remain on the Security Council, the universality rule is fundamental. Surely my right hon. Friend will accept that.

Qana is worthy of a special debate. I welcome the report on it, and congratulate the Secretary-General on its speedy production. In this country, we know that how long reports and inquiries can take. I find it appalling that the United States and Israel have been trying to keep that crucial report under wraps. UNIFIL is supported by the United Kingdom from our sovereign bases in Cyprus, and I hope that the Government will continue to take a robust line in support of that UN peacekeeping force.

On peacekeeping, we need better procedures to deal with the new world in which we will find ourselves in the next century, when I fear that there will be more civil wars. We will need to hold back before committing peacekeeping forces, and not spread the UN effort too thin.

Many years ago, I worked for Sir Hugh Foot, when he was the colonial governor of Cyprus. He wrote in his book "A Start in Freedom" some excellent words about the UN, with which I will finish:

> "I have always believed that the forces of conciliation are potentially stronger than those of conflict. The trouble is that the forces of hatred and conflict are so well organised and well led while the forces of conciliation are ill organised or ill led, or not organised or led at all. Now in the United Nations we have a permanent organisation for promoting international understanding and co-operation. It is this new initiative which gives us new hope in a divided world."

2.51 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Jeremy Hanley): I should like to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath (Mr. Townsend) for this opportunity to debate Britain and the United Nations.

I was honoured and pleased to be one of the United Nations Association's UN ambassadors in the United Nations 50th anniversary year. I am not so pleased to admit that that was because I was born in the same year as the United Nations. It was an extremely good year. In that connection, I was also pleased to represent the Government at the religious service organised by the UNA on 24 October to mark the 50th anniversary.

[Mr. Jeremy Hanley]

I was lucky to visit the UN headquarters at New York during the General Assembly in 1990. I should also like to pay tribute to my local UN association in Richmond and Twickenham, which does excellent work by informing local people of the hopes and values of the UN.

When King George Vl addressed the first UN General Assembly held in London in January 1946, he said that building the United Nations was "noble work". That sentiment remains as valid today as it was then. The international community needs the UN. It is the only international organisation with the legitimacy, mechanisms and resources capable of promoting a stable, secure and prosperous world. It represents the voice of the international community. The challenges it faces are many. But those voices that criticise the UN for the weaknesses common to all international bureaucracies would soon find out that, if we had no UN, we would need to invent it.

Without the UN, the burden on the world's super-powers would be immense. There is wide recognition that the UN needs to put its own house in order. That message came through loud and clear during last year's 50th anniversary year. There was much introspection and analysis of the UN's performance. But high-profile media attention focused too much on UN setbacks—from corruption in the World Health Organisation to failure in Somalia. The pendulum swung too far in the direction of pessimism.

The UN was not given credit for some real successes: for example, bringing peace to previously war-stricken countries, such as Mozambique, where UN peacekeepers helped demobilise 100,000 combatants; El Salvador; Cambodia, and now Angola, where the UN is overseeing the peace accords. The UN peacekeeping mission in Haiti has been an especially successful and unsung mission, with a major United States component under UN command.

Who knows of the small successful missions in Macedonia, or the force in 1994 in Chad overseeing the withdrawal of Libyan forces from the Aouzou strip? Who refers very often to the humanitarian efforts of the special representative of the Secretary-General in Burundi? They are helping to prevent instability from becoming genocide. I am pleased that that was mentioned at Question Time earlier this week, but I have not read much about it in the press.

The UN has done excellent, unsung humanitarian work through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. It has been a motor for democracy, sustainable development and the rule of law. Its record on human rights has been outstanding in setting universal standards and in progressively canalising pressure from democracies and non-governmental organisations to address the problems of human rights violations where and when they occur.

Britain, for its part, remains wholeheartedly committed to the purposes and principles of the UN charter. We have been at the heart of the UN for the past 50 years. Britain helped to draft the UN charter, which has stood the test of time and remains a testament to the vision of the founding fathers. Britain hosted the first meetings of the UN General Assembly and the Security Council in London in 1946.

British forces have a long record of service with the UN, from Cyprus 30 years ago—where my hon. Friend served so well and gallantly—to Kuwait, Rwanda, Angola and Bosnia more recently. Britain can be proud of its contribution. From 1993 to 1995, we were one of the major UN troop contributors, and the UK has made strenuous efforts to find a long-term solutions to many of those problems.

As a permanent member of the Security Council, Britain is at the centre of decision making. Our permanent seat on the council gives us an important point of leverage in international affairs, and we bring a wealth of experience to the council.

We have contributed strongly in ideas and constructive proposals to the continuing process of United Nations reform, to which my hon. Friend referred. I agree with him that the United Nations' financial crisis is its greatest challenge. Its perennial cash flow problems result principally from the continued failure of some member states to fulfil their international treaty obligation to pay their assessed contributions to the UN promptly and in full.

My hon. Friend was robust in his criticism. We have consistently encouraged others to follow our example of full and prompt payment, and will continue to repeat those sentiments in all relevant forums and to all donors; but the long-term solution lies in reform of UN finances.

At the end of 1995, arrears to the UN had reached an unprecedented $2.3 billion. That was $500 million higher than a year earlier, and $800 million higher than two years earlier. Percentage payment by all member states had dropped to less than 93 per cent. of the amount assessed. The US rate of payment had dropped to 47 per cent.

In 1995, the UN cross-borrowed continually and extensively from peacekeeping operations to fund the regular budget. The level of borrowing and length of time that amounts were borrowed were unprecedented. Never before has the UN reached year end without repaying the amounts borrowed from peacekeeping operations. The consequent shortfall on peacekeeping budgets delayed reimbursement to those member states providing troops and equipment for peacekeeping operations. We are working with other member states to put a stop to that practice.

The UK has made strenuous efforts to help. It has also made strenuous efforts to find a long-term solution to financial problems. In January 1996, the UK made proposals—which are now a European Union initiative—to put the organisation back on a secure financial footing. They comprise measures to tighten penalties on non-payers; to accelerate repayment of arrears; to reform the scales of assessment to bring them more into line with the principle of capacity to pay; and to tighten controls on UN expenditure. We firmly believe that the EU proposals are the best solution offered, and we are lobbying member states for support.

A related challenge is the reform of the UN's institutions where there is a real need to revitalise the UN's system and make it more relevant for the future. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister took a lead role at the G7 summit at Halifax last June in pressing for reform. The Halifax communiqué contained clear language on the need for more effective policy co-ordination within the economic and social areas of the UN's activities, the elimination of overlaps and streamlining of UN bodies, including a more transparent and accountable secretariat.

We have been working hard with our G8 and EU partners to achieve those goals. It is no mean feat to change an organisation as large as the UN, but progress is being made, I can assure my hon. Friend. There is an increasing acceptance by member states, including some key developing countries, and by the UN itself that reform is necessary and desirable so that the UN can more effectively meet the needs of its members.

However, a great deal more work is required. Mandates must be refocused, processes streamlined and modern management techniques introduced if the UN is to emerge as a credible international institution in the 21st century. Britain is pressing consistently across the spectrum of UN activities for the necessary reforms, and is constantly urging all others concerned about the UN to do the same.

I will refer briefly at this point to the subject of Britain rejoining UNESCO, which my hon. Friend has discussed with me; I know that he feels strongly about it. The Government keep that under constant review. No decision to rejoin has yet been taken, but, as my hon. Friend will know, we have recognised the reforms undertaken since we left in 1985. However, we believe that more still needs to be done—for example, a more focused approach, greater decentralisation and reduction of administrative costs. There is also an opportunity cost to the aid programme, which would have to be taken into account.

Britain has made proposals to strengthen UN peacekeeping to enable the UN to respond more rapidly to crises. We have seconded military officers to the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations. Under a British initiative, we are now working with African states and the Organisation of African Unity to develop a framework within which African peacekeeping capabilities can be built up. Our efforts have been recognised and welcomed in Africa, and, together with the French, we have sought to overcome traditional Anglophone/Francophone barriers.

Improving the UN's preventive diplomacy capabilities is another area where we have been active. The UN needs to take effective action to prevent crises before they erupt. The preventive deployment in Macedonia shows what can be achieved. We have been active nationally. Under an initiative with the French, we provided the UN with a senior political adviser to assist the UN team mediating in the recent inter-Tajik peace talks. We have given the UN a representative list of those whom we would make available for preventive diplomacy initiatives. We look to the UN to make use of that list.

In his address to the UN General Assembly last autumn, my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary suggested that the UN adopt a new approach to peace-building called "UN programmes for transition and stabilisation ". The aim is to harness UN and international effort against clear aims.

We want to see a coherent approach to post-conflict peace-building which draws together political, peacekeeping, democratisation, humanitarian and development efforts within an overall framework. The UN mission in Haiti has been a particularly interesting model of an integrated approach. That will require UN departments and programmes to abandon their traditional barriers and work to a common aim—the United Nations Development Programme and the Department of Humanitarian Affairs, together with Political Affairs.

Britain is also active in the debate on enlargement of the Security Council. That debate has been under way now for more than two years. There is a consensus in favour of enlargement. Germany and Japan have more support than others for permanent membership, but beyond that, no consensus yet exists on specifics. We believe that the time has come for real decisions. It is in the best interests of the council that the debate does not drag on.

My hon. Friend referred to human rights. I shall write to him on the question he posed. The UK is an active member of the Commission, and is involved in the negotiations on most resolutions. My fellow Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Upminster (Sir N. Bonsor), visited the Commission on 26 March, where he delivered a national statement and announced a further £1 million contribution to UN human rights field operations in Rwanda.

At the time of my visit to New York in 1990, there were 159 member states in the United Nations. In only five and a half years, that number has increased to 185. Such rapid change is not easy to manage, and it requires flexibility and determination. As the UN approaches the millennium, it must meet that challenge. To do so, it needs to put its house in order; it needs to adopt modern practices of administration and management; and it needs to adapt its public image to modern times, so that the media get the good news and the successes, not just the bad news. We will continue to play our part in helping the UN to adapt to the needs of the member states.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at five minutes past Three o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 13 May 1996

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Non-departmental Public Bodies

1. **Mr. William O'Brien:** To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what plans he has to make non-departmental bodies more accountable to the House; and if he will make a statement. [27664]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Mr. Roger Freeman): The Government are committed to improving the accountability of non-departmental public bodies. We welcomed the recommendations in the first report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, and have recently published a consultative paper on propriety and accountability issues in public bodies.

Mr. O'Brien: Will the Chancellor address the vexed question of Members of Parliament who write to Ministers and find that their questions are shuttled off to some agency or other body? Many of those questions relate to the health, welfare and destinies of our constituents. Will the right hon. Gentleman ensure that Ministers who are responsible for their Departments answer such questions? Will he also ensure that non-departmental bodies are more open and democratic, and serve members of the community as they wish to be served?

Mr. Freeman: I am sure that all hon. Members have found the experiment involving chief executives of agencies answering questions of fact helpful. I well understand that one or two hon. Members might not approve of the practice, and it is open to them to write directly to Ministers and to ask for replies that can be made public in due course. I shall, however, bear in mind what the hon. Gentleman has said when we review the practice.

Dr. Spink: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is absurd to refer to the governing bodies of grant-maintained schools as quangos? Are not those bodies staffed by dedicated local people who give of the wealth and breadth of their experience? Surely they should not be made more directly accountable to the House; they do an excellent job now—and they would no doubt have a view about the withdrawal of child benefit from some of their students by the Labour party.

Mr. Freeman: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for paying tribute to the work of not only grant-maintained school governing bodies but, by implication, national health service trusts and other bodies that draw on volunteers from the private sector who give their time freely and, in most cases, without payment. Let me record the Government's gratitude to all who serve on such bodies.

Mr. Derek Foster: Is not the real problem about quangos the fact that they have become the unelected, unaccountable and secretive state? As the right hon. Gentleman's party has been swept from office in local government, has it not transferred functions to unelected quangos and packed them with its placemen and women, and are not those bodies—health authorities, for example—totally unaccountable to the communities that they serve? Why does the Chancellor not apply his mind to that problem?

Mr. Freeman: I do not accept the right hon. Gentleman's analysis, and his suggestion that such bodies are in some way unaccountable to their local communities. The Conservative party has argued, and continues to argue successfully, that they are drawn from—and therefore represent, in a very real sense, the aspirations and needs of—their local communities.

Mr. John Marshall: Is my right hon. Friend aware that one of the first schools to become grant-maintained was Hendon school, in my constituency, which is now over-subscribed rather than under-subscribed? Is he also aware that, while Labour Members may attack non-departmental bodies in the House, they are happy to send their children to grant-maintained schools? That includes the Leader of the Opposition.

Mr. Freeman: I note what my hon. Friend says. We have reduced the number of non-departmental public bodies by 43 per cent. since 1979—from 2,167 to 1,227 at the end of 1995. That excludes grant-maintained schools and national health service trusts, but it reflects a welcome downward trend.

Government Policy Co-ordination

2. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what recent review he has conducted of the co-ordination of Government policy; and what conclusions he has reached. [27665]

The Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. Michael Heseltine): The co-ordination of Government policy is kept under constant review. I have no proposals to change present arrangements.

Mr. Hughes: The first part of that answer might be a jolly good thing, because I was going to ask the Deputy Prime Minister whether there had been a particular review since the local government elections. If the governing party loses half the seats that it is defending, if it is left with about a dozen councils in England, Scotland and Wales, if it has the fewest local government seats that it has had since, I think, the last war and if it is now the third party in local government, is there not something to review and, if so, what is the result of the Government's evaluation of an abysmal local election performance?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I should have thought that the hon. Gentleman would remember that, at the last election, his party lost every by-election seat that it had won and that he would have learnt a lesson from that: one does not take short-term measures when one is fighting a general election campaign, which will be determined in real circumstances in a year's time, when the Tories will win.

Mr. Jessel: On Government policy on the national lottery and its provision for good causes, is my right hon. Friend aware that the Charities Aid Foundation has announced—if I heard my car radio right about half an hour ago—that there has been no reduction in the general provision of money for charities by the public as a result of the national lottery, and that that is apart from the money thrown up for charities by the national lottery, which is a tremendous national achievement and has conferred terrific benefit?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to draw the House's attention to that exciting news, which builds on the considerable increase in charitable giving that other Government measures have already achieved. The present lottery additionality is welcomed by many causes.

Mr. Prescott: Does the Deputy Prime Minister acknowledge the disarray in the presentation of Government policy on British beef, where the Secretary of State for Health accused the public, and not the cows, of being mad? Does the Deputy Prime Minister therefore agree with the Foreign Secretary's assessment in his leaked letter to the Prime Minister that the Government suffer from poor co-ordination of policy? Does the Deputy Prime Minister accept any responsibility for that?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The whole House knows that this is one of the most difficult issues that any Government have faced in a long time; trying to make party points out of it serves no purpose. The Government's policy is clear: we are, where we can, helping the farming community and we are dealing with the issues in world forums and in the world political scene, wherever relevant. We must persuade other people in sovereign countries to change their minds. We will not do so by belittling our effort on a party political basis.

Mr. Wilkinson: Reverting to the vexed issue of the European Union's ban on British beef exports and the difference—the apparent difference, of course—in the governmental approach to it between acquiescence and possible retaliation, will my right hon. Friend and Her Majesty's Government concentrate on the EU's ban on British beef exports to non-EU countries as that is clearly beyond the EU's jurisdiction? Will my right hon. Friend make it clear that, if that aspect of the ban persists, Her Majesty's Government will be prepared to retaliate?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I think that my hon. Friend would want to bear in mind the fact that many of those countries introduced a ban of their own and that a significant number of them did so long before the European Union. This is an international issue; it is now a European issue. The beef market in many European countries is suffering more than this country's beef market. This stretching, difficult political issue can be dealt with only by negotiation, however aggravated and difficult it undoubtedly is.

Government Policy (Europe)

6. **Mr. MacShane:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what new initiatives he is planning to promote Government policy on Europe. [27669]

The Deputy Prime Minister: The Government have recently published a very clear statement of their policy on Europe in the White Paper on the intergovernmental conference, "A Partnership of Nations". I commend it to the hon. Member.

Mr. MacShane: The tiredness of that reply and the feebleness of the previous one show exactly the extent to which the Deputy Prime Minister no longer puts real energy behind any of the Government's policies. His party is now a sick joke over Europe. As a strong European and a man who has given many years of service to his party, does he not feel that the time may have come to retire and enjoy a few years of peace, leaving the party fight to the rabble behind him?

The Deputy Prime Minister: No.

Mr. Anthony Coombs: As the Labour party so cravenly does not want to be isolated on Europe, and as the Liberal Democrats want a European federal state, will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Conservative party is the only one that wants to see the competencies of the European Union repatriated to this country in the forthcoming intergovernmental conference?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend gives me the opportunity to state quite clearly that the real difference between the Government and the Opposition side is that we wish to have a Europe based on the nation state whereas they wish to have a Europe to which they are prepared to move critical powers, the effect of which would be to undermine the competitiveness of the British economy. Nowhere is that more clear than in their willingness to accept the social chapter and the minimum wage, the effect of which would be to deter investment in this country and to create more unemployment than is in any way justified. My authority for that last statement is the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull, East (Mr. Prescott), who has made it absolutely clear that the minimum wage, "as any fool knows", to quote his words, will cause a loss of jobs.

Mr. Beith: Will the Deputy Prime Minister clarify whether the Government see the European Court of Justice as a necessary body to which the Government must have recourse if other European countries take action that distorts markets or prevents free competition, as in the case of beef, or as an unwelcome intrusion into the private affairs of member states? Surely it has to be one or the other.

The Deputy Prime Minister: No, it does not have to be one or the other at all. There cannot be a single market without rules and there cannot be rules without someone to enforce them. Therefore, there has to be a European

Court of Justice. In the Government's view, that does not mean that all its decisions are right, or that some of its powers cannot be improved. As we propose in the White Paper, we intend to address those issues and we shall certainly do so at the intergovernmental conference.

Mr. Caborn: Will the Deputy Prime Minister tell the House how he intends to promote the new policy on competitiveness that was outlined by the President of the Board of Trade in a speech last week? It cuts across the two White Papers on competitiveness and has left them in total disarray. How will the right hon. Gentleman communicate that?

The Deputy Prime Minister: If I had a problem of that sort I would address it, but as there is no such problem I have not had to put my mind to it.

Deregulation Task Force

7. **Mr. Jim Cunningham:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many firms with fewer than 100 employees are represented on the Government's deregulation task force. [27671]

Mr. Freeman: We do not hold figures for the number of people employed by each of the firms that has a member on the deregulation task force. However, three of the 12 business representatives are from small firms.

Mr. Cunningham: Will the Minister explain why there are more ex-Tory Members of Parliament on the deregulation task force than small business men, bearing it in mind that 99 per cent. of the task force's work involves small businesses?

Mr. Freeman: The appointments to the deregulation task force—the posts are unpaid—are drawn from those with expertise in different sectors of the economy. I pay tribute to the work of the task force under its current chairman, the right hon. Francis Maude, who has made a valuable contribution to identifying areas in which we should deregulate. Criticism of the deregulation task force comes ill from a party that, as I understand it, wants to scrap the task force and the deregulation unit in the Cabinet Office.

Mr. Steen *rose—*

Madam Speaker: It is scarcely deserving, Mr. Steen, but I shall recognise you.

Mr. Steen: I explained the circumstances that brought me into the Chamber, and on the way I was delayed by a call that all of us understand.

Is not the problem with deregulation one of culture, and is not the culture of this place—of hon. Members, Ministers and civil servants—geared to passing more laws? This place spends all its time passing laws. Until we change that culture so that Ministers, hon. Members and civil servants do not think about passing more laws, we will not make the progress on deregulation that we should like.

Mr. Freeman: Had my hon. Friend been able to put the question on which I had done a considerable amount of research, I might have been able to tell him that, in changing the culture, it is very important for Departments to focus on areas for repeal of primary and secondary legislation. We have made a good start by identifying 1,000 necessary repeals or amendments. We have already dealt with more than 600 of those, and the remaining 400 will have been dealt with by the end of this calendar year. That culture change should apply not only to Whitehall but to Brussels.

Next Steps Agencies

8. **Mr. Heppell:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what plans he has to increase the number of next steps agencies in the next 12 months. [27672]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service (Mr. David Willetts): With some 70 per cent. of civil servants already working under next steps arrangements, we are getting very close to the original estimate of covering three quarters of the civil service. There are currently 124 agencies in operation, as well as Her Majesty's Customs and Excise and the Inland Revenue, which operate on next steps lines. I would expect about two dozen more agencies to be set up in the coming year.

Mr. Heppell: Does the Minister agree with the views expressed today in *The Guardian* by the former chief executive of the Prison Service, that all Government agencies should be protected from incompetent and over-excited Ministers?

Mr. Willetts: The framework within which staff in next steps agencies work is very clear: they are civil servants; they are bound by normal civil service rules; they are accountable to Ministers; and Ministers, in turn, are accountable to the House.

Deregulation

9. **Sir David Knox:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the progress of deregulation. [27673]

10. **Mr. Pike:** To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what are the main objectives for deregulation during the next 12 months. [27674]

Mr. Freeman: Eleven deregulation orders have passed into law, and there is a steady flow of new orders. We shall also work to make enforcement decisions more business friendly and to encourage a similar approach to regulation in Europe. Specific priorities include pay-as-you-earn and national insurance contributions joint working and a substantial reduction in the burden of Government surveys.

Sir David Knox: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, while it is sensible to get rid of pointless and unnecessary regulations, it is not very sensible to deregulate merely for the sake of deregulation? Does he agree that many regulations that appear silly to the layman can be justified and should be retained?

Mr. Freeman: The House will recognise that there is a constant flow of new regulations emanating from Brussels and from Whitehall, which is inevitable in an increasingly complicated society. Some regulations, however, have outlived their usefulness—I refer specifically to Victorian social legislation on what we do on Sundays—and are no longer appropriate. It is appropriate to remove specific burdens on businesses when that is helpful and does not jeopardise the protection of employees or the environment.

Mr. Pike: Why does not the Chancellor admit that—other than many of those petty, outdated Victorian regulations that surely should have gone many years ago—his Department is increasingly discovering that regulation is necessary for protection in many areas and that it is impossible to remove much of it, contrary to what the Government thought possible a few years ago?

Mr. Freeman: Interestingly, the Health and Safety Commission has discovered that it can, with safety and without jeopardising the protection of the consumer or the work force, reduce by 40 per cent. the number of health and safety regulations. That shows what can be done, Department by Department, without jeopardising the principles to which the hon. Gentleman referred and with which I agree.

Deregulation (Small Business Sector)

11. **Mr. Llwyd:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what proposals there are to deregulate the small business sector; and if he will make a statement. [27675]

Mr. Willetts: A package of new measures for small business was announced at the "Your Business Matters" conference on 11 March. The measures included a single notification point for tax and national insurance for new businesses and new rights for business in enforcement actions. A further response to the issues raised by small businesses during the conferences will be published in June.

Mr. Llwyd: I thank the Minister for that answer. I am a small business man—I have been in business for some 20 years—and find the notion of depriving thousands of people of the protection afforded by employment tribunals quite abhorrent. Indeed, that feeling has been expressed wherever I have been. Is it not a ridiculous notion? I hope that the Government are not stupid enough to pursue it.

Mr. Willetts: There will be no question of making any such proposals without full consideration and legal advice. Overall, however, the Government are committed to reducing the burdens on business. As the hon. Gentleman is a small business man, I am sure that he will recognise that the fact that 500,000 of the smallest companies no longer have to have their accounts audited is a welcome easing of the burdens that they face.

Government Policy Co-ordination

13. **Mr. Win Griffiths:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will make a statement on his recent activities concerning the co–ordination and presentation of Government policy. [27677]

The Deputy Prime Minister: I continue to chair the ministerial group on the co-ordination and presentation of Government policy and to promote the remarkable success of our polices in creating in this country the enterprise centre of Europe.

Mr. Griffiths: I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for that answer. Will he be appearing on television to support the views of the Foreign Secretary, who is seeking ways deliberately to block business in Europe, or the views that he has expressed in the past and which are shared by the Chancellor of the Exchequer about playing a constructive role in the European Union?

The Deputy Prime Minister: But the Foreign Secretary, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and I are wholly agreed on our approach to European policy.

Small Businesses

14. **Mr. Timms:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what steps he is taking to improve the competitiveness of small businesses. [27679]

17. **Mrs. Clwyd:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what steps he is taking to improve the competitiveness of small businesses. [27682]

Mr. Freeman: The Prime Minister announced a range of measures to help small firms at the final "Your Business Matters" conference in March. They included further reductions in bureaucracy, measures to help with late payment and a radical review of the Government's business support schemes. The Government will respond in full to the issues raised at the conferences in a publication produced alongside the third competitiveness White Paper in the summer.

Mr. Timms: Why, then, have the Government placed the new burden on small businesses of having to check the immigration status of job applicants? Would not it have been better for the Government to have supported Labour's amendment to the Asylum and Immigration Bill, which would have exempted firms with fewer than 10 employees from that requirement and from the £5,000 fine when they get it wrong?

Mr. Freeman: I know that my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary has made great efforts to ensure that the burdens on businesses caused by their enforcing the provisions in the Asylum and Immigration Bill are minimised as much as possible. However, the provisions must be effective and we cannot simply exempt small firms from the Bill's general requirements.

Mrs. Clwyd: How can the Minister expect to be taken seriously on this issue when his boss boasts about stringing along his creditors and when late payments to small businesses doubled when his boss was President of the Board of Trade?

Mr. Freeman: That is a travesty of what my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State said or implied or believes. In any case, my right hon. Friend is well able to answer for himself and has already done so.

As for setting a standard for prompt payment, the Prime Minister and the President of the Board of Trade have made it plain that the Government must set that standard. The Prime Minister has taken steps to ensure that each Department examines its own practices and pays promptly but, very often, the reason for late payment is that there is some fundamental problem with the invoice or bill itself. One cannot expect Government Departments, which are dispensing taxpayers' money, automatically to pay every bill simply because there is a payment deadline to be met. I hope that the hon. Lady is satisfied with that reply.

Government Policy

15. **Mr. Jacques Arnold:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister which was the principal Government policy with which he was concerned in the week beginning 6 May. [27680]

The Deputy Prime Minister: I have continued to work on a full range of those Government policies for which I am responsible.

Mr. Arnold: When my right hon. Friend co-ordinates Government policy, does he have the problem that some Cabinet members—*[Interruption.]* Does he find that some Cabinet members have not spoken to each other for 18 months, which is precisely the problem that his opposite number in the Labour party has with shadow Cabinet members?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a most interesting point, which shows proper compassion for the Labour party's activities. I would be very happy to offer to hold a reception for the Leader of the Opposition, so that his shadow Cabinet could get together in convivial circumstances and try to sort out their difficulties in private.

Mr. Skinner: Given his Government's record, has not the Deputy Prime Minister got a cheek to lecture anybody about not being united and not speaking to one another? Is it not a fact that a little over 12 months ago his Prime Minister said that he had three bastards in the Cabinet? I told him that he could not count. Then he had a ballot, in which the Deputy Prime Minister refused to take part—Redwood *v.* Deadwood—and the net result was that the Prime Minister found that he had 89 bastards instead of three.

The Deputy Prime Minister: I shall be very happy to invite the hon. Gentleman to the reception as well—then the shadow Cabinet could really learn what new Labour is all about.

Madam Speaker: We now come to Question 16.

The Deputy Prime Minister *rose—*

Mr. Prescott: Not you again.

The Deputy Prime Minister: Yes, there is more of this; it is me all the way from now on. *[Laughter.]* I have to keep the deputy leader of the Labour party amused. Since the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) cannot amuse him, I can at least bring a little light relief.

English Language

16. **Mr. Rathbone:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what priority he attaches to English as a language when co-ordinating Government policies. [27681]

The Deputy Prime Minister: The Government attach great importance to the use of clear and appropriate language in all areas of their work.

Mr. Rathbone: Although this question does not in any way point to this Chamber, it is notable that the Government are reducing expenditure on the British Council, the great spreader and supporter of the English language throughout the world. Would the Government reconsider the reduction?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I share my hon. Friend's views about the importance of the British Council's work, but the allocation of funding responsibilities must remain a matter for my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary.

Mr. Flynn: Should not the Procedure Committee be congratulated on recommending that a policy that has applied since 1536 be reversed so that for the first time in 460 years a language other than English is to be used in conducting the business of the House? Will the right hon. Gentleman give an undertaking that he will do his best to speed up the recommendation that both the beautiful languages of Wales—Welsh and English—should be used in the proceedings of the only parliament that Wales has?

The Deputy Prime Minister: It sounds as though this is another example of precipitate action. The hon. Gentleman has raised an interesting point and I shall give it a great deal of attention later today.

Deregulation

22. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what assessment he has made of the effects of deregulation on public safety. [27687]

Mr. Freeman: When making orders under the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994, Ministers are required to show that necessary protection for public safety will be maintained. Deregulation is about making legislation clear and less burdensome—not about removing legitimate public protection.

Mr. Flynn: In the light of the continuing tragedy of bovine spongiform encephalopathy, why do not the Government stop blaming everyone else—from the Opposition to other countries—when the root of this uniquely British disease stems from a decision taken in the 1980s to deregulate the rendering industry? When will the Government learn that the decisions that they are taking on deregulation might cause enormous problems to public safety in the years ahead?

Mr. Freeman: I do not accept the analysis by the hon. Gentleman. If he wishes to pursue this line of questioning about the connection between deregulation and the origin of BSE, I shall be delighted to enter into correspondence with him. He is factually incorrect. I refer to assessing the

risk to society as a result of introducing new regulations and repealing existing regulations. The Government have recently published a document—I have placed a copy in the Library—to help Departments determine the risk inherent in any repeal of legislation. It details how Departments can quantify risk and the benefit to society of legislating and of repealing legislation.

OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT

Trade Unions (Third-world Countries)

27. **Mr. MacShane:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assistance he provides to support the development of free trade unions in third-world countries. [27692]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Jeremy Hanley): Under the British aid programme, support is provided for projects to improve working conditions and terms of service through the workers group development scheme, and for trade union education and training through the joint funding scheme.

Mr. MacShane: I had hoped that the Minister would provide a figure as my question was about assistance. As the Minister knows, this year the Government will provide about £200,000 to support democratic trade unionism in the third world. In comparison, the United States will provide about $20 million; Sweden will provide about £6 million; and even the Netherlands—a country with a similar profile to the United Kingdom—will provide some £7 million.

When will the Government drop their pathetic, mean-minded hostility towards trade unions? Even if the Government hate trade unions in this country, they should recognise that they are part of the building blocks of democracy in the third world. The Government should give support to democratic trade unionism in the third world.

Mr. Hanley: We support responsible trade unionism as part of promoting good government. Since 1987 we have given £1 million in aid to the joint funding scheme, and every year we give £200,000 to the workers group development scheme for trade union and employee development. That scheme covers important issues such as women's rights, health and safety, and financial management.

I believe that the new workers group development scheme is a success. It has been fully spent this year, with nine projects. However, there are competing interests for funding by the Department. I believe that the current scheme is a success.

Mr. Jessel: The power and influence of trade unions were drastically curtailed in this country in the early 1980s, which was followed by the biggest period of economic expansion ever in the history of this country—which is being echoed by the growth in our economy in the mid-1990s. Therefore, is it not poor advice to developing countries that they should foster the development of trade unions?

Mr. Hanley: I do not agree with my hon. Friend. Support for trade unions forms part of our support for good government. We want to encourage representative and responsible civil societies and responsible trade unions, along with business associations, have a role in this. Some of my hon. Friends have suggested that business associations are just as important as trade unions for growth and democracy—and I agree. We are willing to consider support for business associations, but they tend to be more self-reliant.

Drinking Water

28. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what initiatives he is taking with the privatised water companies to provide expertise and material for the distribution of drinking water in developing countries. [27693]

Mr. Hanley: Four of the major privatised water companies are currently involved in projects funded under the British aid programme, which relate to the supply and distribution of drinking water in developing countries. We will continue to encourage the water companies to bid for new water-related projects in developing countries.

Mr. Fabricant: Is my right hon. Friend aware that, since privatisation, Severn Trent, which of course supplies water to constituents in Mid-Staffordshire, gives £55,000 a year to Water Aid in developing countries; that, last year, about £300,000 was collected from staff of Severn Trent for Water Aid in developing countries; and that, this year, Severn Trent adopted Ethiopia for exploration for and distribution of fresh water? What more can my right hon. Friend do to ensure that other water companies follow that lead?

Mr. Hanley: I am aware of Severn Trent's excellent record, which my hon. Friend is right to bring to the attention of the House. He asks what more can be done.

During the launch of a recent water initiative called Water for Life, my right hon. and noble Friend the Minister for Overseas Development encouraged the United Kingdom private sector, including the water companies and other non-governmental organisations, to take an active role in the development of the water sector in developing countries.

I am pleased that, in addition to the support provided under Britain's bilateral aid programme, the privatised water companies are encouraged to pursue those activities in the water sector in developing countries, funded by the multilateral agencies to which the UK contributes.

I should also mention the overseas projects board water group, which is convened by the Department of Trade and Industry and chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King). It provides a forum for the exchange of information with the major water boards about current activities and opportunities in the water sector in developing countries.

Reconstruction (South Africa)

29. **Mr. Rathbone:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last had discussions with representatives of the South African Government about Britain's contribution to reconstruction in that country; and if he will make a statement. [27695]

Mr. Hanley: We maintain a regular high-level dialogue with the South African Government. My right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, my right hon. and noble Friend the Minister for Overseas Development and my hon. Friend the Minister for Trade have all visited recently. Bilateral relations are excellent and British aid to the transition process is highly valued.

Mr. Rathbone: While I welcome that statement and endorse those efforts, what advance is being made in the European Union to establish a better trading relationship between South Africa and the European Union, which that country desperately needs?

Mr. Hanley: I thank my hon. Friend for that question because Britain is highly committed to giving South Africa better access to the EU market as an important way of contributing to its growth. We have argued throughout that the new arrangements should be as generous as possible. However, some EU member states wanted to limit the scope of the agreement by excluding, from the outset of the negotiations, many South African agricultural exports; we have consistently opposed that.

After several months of talks within the European Union, the 25 March meeting of the EU Foreign Ministers had before it a draft mandate to open negotiations with South Africa. The mandate was not as liberal as we wanted, and we had the option of blocking it, but the South Africans told us that they wanted to begin negotiations as soon as possible so we decided to abstain. We have nevertheless issued a declaration outlining our concerns, with which Sweden associated itself.

I agree with my hon. Friend that we need to improve the relationship between the EU and South Africa, primarily to further the cause of improving South Africa.

Miss Emma Nicholson: Is the Minister able to assure us that he is doing everything he can in the Council of Ministers to gain entry into the full Lomé convention for South Africa, as that would be of such benefit to South Africa's reconstruction plan?

Mr. Hanley: Yes. The Commission recently opened direct negotiations with South Africa to work out the details of the trade agreement. The mandate contains an explicit commitment to regional economic co-operation and integration, and states that South Africa will be encouraged to provide improved market access opportunities to its southern African neighbours.

On EU-South African liberalisation, the Commission has made it clear that it will return to the Council to ask for greater negotiating flexibility if the current mandate proves too restrictive.

Mr. Batiste: Does my right hon. Friend agree that trade is a very important ingredient in the reconstruction of South Africa? Will he have a word with his colleagues at the Department of Trade and Industry to ensure that, at a time when funding for trade missions is very tight, trade missions to South Africa have some measure of continuity from year to year so as to encourage mutual arrangements between small businesses in the respective countries?

Mr. Hanley: I thoroughly agree with my hon. Friend: trade and investment is the key to South Africa's long-term prosperity. The Government are committed to developing commercial links with South Africa, but there is still a role for well-targeted aid. Our aid is designed to help to develop sound policies, to establish models of sustainable development and to focus on disadvantaged groups. We must improve our trade links, and my hon. Friend points in a useful direction with trade missions.

World Poverty

30. **Mr. William O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to meet the Christian Aid group to discuss world poverty; and if he will make a statement. [27696]

Mr. Hanley: My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary met representatives of Christian Aid and other non-governmental organisations in the development field on 23 January and plans to have a follow-up meeting with them later this year. I met a number of NGOs, including Christian Aid, at a Foreign Office seminar on 25 April. My right hon. and noble Friend the Minister for Overseas Development and her officials have frequent contacts with those organisations, the next such meeting being on 16 May. Our discussions with the NGOs cover a wide range of issues affecting developing countries, including poverty reduction.

Mr. O'Brien: In view of the Minister's response, will he assure me that he will support the campaign by the Christian Aid group to eradicate poverty in Africa? In 1994, the poor people of Africa paid £10 billion to the country's wealthy creditors and obviously assistance is going in the wrong direction. Will the Minister support Christian Aid's campaign to try to reverse that process?

Mr. Hanley: Yes, I certainly believe that that is the main focus of our aid to Africa. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we have written off £1.2 billion in Overseas Development Administration debt for 31 countries—of which 18 were African—since the 1970s. Poverty reduction in Africa is an important part of all of our programmes. It is one of the reasons why at the spring meeting of the World bank and the International Monetary Fund last month it was agreed that several heavily indebted, poor countries have an unsustainable burden of debt and that action must be taken to reduce it so as not to put their reform efforts at risk. That action is being taken on the multilateral debt side. We are leading not only the European Union but the world community in trying to alleviate poverty in Africa.

Miss Lestor: Can the Minister confirm that at the recent conference in Oslo, which an ODA representative attended, the NGOs made it clear that they believe that the 20:20 compact—endorsed on a voluntary basis by the British Government at the world summit in Copenhagen last year—forms a vital part of a comprehensive strategy for the alleviation of poverty? Given that the Government have reduced this year's aid budget by £124 million; that, on current plans, the proportion of gross national product devoted to aid will fall to an all-time low of 0.26 per cent. by 2000; and that the fundamental expenditure review does not refer to the 20:20 compact, what plans does the

Minister have to meet the United Nations target of 20 per cent. development assistance to be invested in basic social services, such as primary health care and education? Why did we achieve only about half of that target in 1994-95?

Mr. Hanley: The 20:20 concept has attracted a good deal of attention because it is a superficially straightforward idea. However, it is unsatisfactory because it emphasises only the quantity of resources at a time of increasing donor awareness about the need to focus on impact, quality and effectiveness. It is an old-fashioned emphasis on inputs rather than outputs, and we want to avoid a return to the 1970s approach of top down, vertically targeted activities which failed to involve the beneficiaries in any assessment of their needs and priorities.

In answer to the hon. Lady's fifth or six question, we still have a substantial aid programme. I repeat that the United Kingdom remains the fifth largest donor despite the small budget reduction this year. We have a substantial budget of £2.154 billion in 1996-97. In 1994, our aid programme was 0.31 per cent. of GNP, which is above average for all donors, and the quality of British aid is extremely high. We still have an excellent record in aid. I do not accept the hon. Lady's criticisms. If she wants to make a financial commitment to increasing aid to 0.7 per cent., I would be grateful if she would say so clearly in the House.

Emergency Disaster Relief

31. **Mr. Jacques Arnold:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on Britain's emergency disaster relief work. [27698]

Mr. Hanley: Since 1 April, the ODA has responded to new emergencies in Bolivia, Chad, Ecuador, Georgia, Lebanon and Mongolia, with grants totalling £844,000. It has also continued funding action in more than 20 other long-term situations.

Mr. Arnold: Is it not the case that the United Kingdom has achieved an enviable reputation for flexibility, speed and effectiveness in the overseas aid that it provides to emergency disaster relief?

Mr. Hanley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Our response to emergencies is highly regarded, but we cannot do everything. So it is important that we concentrate on what we can do best: supporting the excellent British specialist non-governmental organisations, running a limited number of direct operations and acting swiftly through our diplomatic posts, as we have in the past month in Bolivia, Lebanon and Mongolia. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Our emergency response is excellent.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

Comptroller and Auditor General

34. **Mr. John Marshall:** To ask the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission what is the number of accountants employed by the Comptroller and Auditor General. [27701]

Sir Peter Hordern (Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission): I understand that the National Audit Office currently employs more than 350 qualified accountants and 70 qualified accounting technicians. A further 103 staff are training for those qualifications. In addition, the NAO contracts out about 12 per cent. of accounts audit work to the private sector. As a result, all accounts are audited by trained staff.

Mr. Marshall: Would my right hon. Friend consider the secondment of just one of those accountants to the United Nations so that Mr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali could learn the virtues of economy? Could he also send one to the German Government, who have yet to pay their annual subscription to the United Nations? Should not those who call for a single European foreign policy at least be willing to pay the bill?

Sir Peter Hordern: The Comptroller and Auditor General is a member of a three-nation board that audits the accounts of the United Nations. Of course, in that capacity he is responsible to the United Nations and not to the House, but if he is able to establish that contributions have not been paid and that the United Kingdom bears an undue burden as a result of that, it would be open to any Member of the House or the Public Accounts Committee to ask him for a report so that the issue could be considered.

National Audit Office

35. **Mr. Steen:** To ask the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission if he will increase the allocation of staff costs in respect of the operating budget of the National Audit Office. [27702]

Sir Peter Hordern: The National Audit Office estimate for 1996-97, approved by the Commission in January, provides for an increasing number of financial audits, for a rise in the level of regularity and propriety work and for sufficient value-for-money investigations to offer the Committee on Public Accounts a margin of choice in the subjects that it considers.

Mr. Steen: That was an impressive answer. However, the House should be aware that, as the National Audit Office aims to ensure that we get better value for money, as all the legislation we pass here is properly vetted and costed and as we have approved 7,850 statutory instruments since January 1994, it must be inevitable that we will have to increase even further the staff at the National Audit Office. As we pass more rules, regulations and Acts of Parliament, the number of staff, the amount of bureaucracy and the number of officials will rise sky high. Will my right hon. Friend comment on that?

Sir Peter Hordern: I do not agree with my hon. Friend. The National Audit Office is an example to every Department. It is increasing the volume of its work and effectiveness at lower cost—in not just real but cash terms. If every Department were to do the same as the NAO, which works on our behalf, the Government and the House would be a great deal better off.

Mr. Olner: If Departments really respect the view of the National Audit Office, how come the Government do not accept the views of the auditors in respect of Westminster city council?

Sir Peter Hordern: Westminster city council's accounts are audited by the Audit Commission, not the National Audit Office.

OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT

British Council

32. **Mr. Hain:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the current role of the British Council in overseas aid programmes. [27699]

Mr. Hanley: The British Council makes a valuable contribution to the UK aid programme, by supporting the Government's development objectives through activities financed by the grant in aid, and more generally as a supplier of educational and other services under contract to the Overseas Development Administration and other development organisations.

Mr. Hain: If the Government recognise that the British Council performs such a valuable role, why are the Government so savagely cutting the council's budget by £22 million over the next three years? That is surely the act of a bunch of cretins, and it breaks an election pledge because in 1992, the Conservatives promised to strengthen the British Council. Having seen the council's valuable work in Angola, Egypt and Gaza I can confirm that the council is not only conducting good works but serves as a shop window for Britain's commercial organisations and image abroad.

Mr. Hanley: Activity in the countries covered is at a record level. The council has 229 offices in 109 countries, compared with 108 offices in 79 countries when we took office. There is no change in Government policy towards British Council grant in aid. We continue to value highly the council's work in development and cultural diplomacy, but the 1995 public expenditure round was particularly rigorous and resulted in a reduction in funds for the aid programme. It was not possible to protect the British Council from the effects, but the way in which that reduction will work its way through is being considered and there will be decisions before the end of this month.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Bishops' Palaces (Maintenance Costs)

36. **Mr. Tony Banks:** To ask the right hon. Member for Selby, representing the Church Commissioners, what are the annual maintenance costs in respect of bishops' palaces. [27703]

Mr. Michael Alison (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): The annual maintenance cost in 1995 for the 45 diocesan bishops' houses, including the Archbishop of Canterbury's London base of Lambeth palace, was £1,704,000. That figure includes repairs and decorations; other outgoings, such as insurance and water rates; garden outgoings, including gardeners' pay; and the cost of staff accommodation, less incomes from lettings and so forth.

Mr. Banks: Methinks the right hon. Gentleman doth protest too much. I did not know the supplementary question that I would ask until, like manna from heaven, I saw a story in the *Daily Mail* reporting the new Bishop of Chelmsford as saying that he does not want his new palace—which offers six bedrooms, three bathrooms, staff accommodation and three acres of ground. That is not sufficient for the new Bishop of Chelmsford. Perhaps he should remember the words of Matthew, chapter 19, verse 24:

> "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

If a manger in a stable was good enough for the Lord, whingeing from the princes of the Church is not good enough for us.

Mr. Alison: The hon. Member for Newham, North–West (Mr. Banks), with almost Gallic fervour, is trying to score a goal in the last five minutes—but he has not succeeded. The good Bishop of Chelmsford occupies a small amount of the accommodation, but the house is impossibly close to the A12 dual carriageway and one cannot hear oneself speak, think or pray in the palace. It would be a good thing if the bishop found better accommodation.

Mr. Garnier: If the hon. and saintly Member for Newham, North-West (Mr. Banks) is so concerned about the size of bishops' palaces, would not one answer be to open them more frequently to the public so that others could also enjoy this architectural heritage, just as we enjoy the heritage of our other great buildings?

Mr. Alison: Yes. My hon. and learned Friend makes a good point. Of the 45 diocesan bishops' residences, only 11 can properly be described as having an historic background. Of those 11, Auckland castle, Hartlebury castle and the palace of Wells are already open to the public; and I believe that the Archbishop of York is seeking to open up Bishopsthorpe in York. My hon. and learned Friend's point is well taken, therefore.

Residential Property

38. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the right hon. Member for Selby, representing the Church Commissioners, what is the number of residential properties that are owned by the Church of England and not currently designated for use by clergy; and if he will place a list of the properties in the Library. [27705]

Mr. Alison: The Church Commissioners do not keep central records of Church of England properties that are not currently designated for use by clergy. Each diocese keeps a record of the property it owns and of clergy's houses, and of whether they are empty or occupied. The Church Commissioners own, as part of their investment

portfolio, a total of 3,720 residential units. In view of the number of these properties, it would not be practicable to place a list of all of them in the Library.

Mr. Hughes: Given the large number of people who are without housing, temporary or permanent, will the right hon. Gentleman make inquiries, if necessary diocese by diocese, so as to satisfy hon. Members that these properties are being made good use of? During the period between one incumbent leaving and another taking up his post—often as long as six months or more—and on any other occasions when properties are not used for Church members of staff, they should not be left empty. Instead, they should be offered, short term, to meet people's housing needs so that the Church's residential property is at all times full and used to house people who might otherwise have no house.

Mr. Alison: As I have said, that is the responsibility of the parishes and dioceses, but I shall see that the hon. Gentleman's observations are passed on to them, in view of his interest in the matter.

It might just be worth pointing out that of the 3,720 residential units for which the Church Commissioners have a direct responsibility, only 24 are currently vacant; of those, 18 are under offer for sale on long lease or short letting. We are anxious to pursue exactly the course that the hon. Gentleman advocates.

Points of Order

3.31 pm

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I fear that the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service, who I see in his place, inadvertently misled the House when winding up the debate on the civil service pension scheme on Tuesday 7 May. At column 130 I said:

"Is not the real reason the Government's wish to privatise Paymaster? Without the order, a privatised Paymaster could not tender for the contract. Without that substantial contract, Paymaster would be a far less attractive proposition for privatisation."

In his closing speech, the Parliamentary Secretary said:

"That has nothing to do with the payment of pensions to former civil servants. The proposals in the order concern entirely the administration of the scheme for current civil servants and are nothing to do with Paymaster's function of paying out benefits and pensions to retired civil servants."—[*Official Report*, 7 May 1996; Vol. 277, c. 130-36.]

The Parliamentary Secretary paid me the courtesy of writing to me to draw this to my attention, but I thought that as he was here answering questions today, he should take the opportunity to put the record straight.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service (Mr. David Willetts): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. I confirm that the order which the House approved last week does cover all aspects of the administration of civil service pensions. I regret that my winding-up speech did not make that point clear. As you know, Madam Speaker, I have placed in the Library of the House a copy of my letter to the right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster) which clarifies the point.

Mr. Anthony Steen (South Hams): On a similar point of order to that of the right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster), Madam Speaker. At last Thursday's oral questions, my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was recorded as saying that an oyster farm in my constituency had been closed because of an

"unacceptable risk to human health."—[*Official Report*, 9 May 1996; Vol. 277, c. 361.]

That is not the case, because the farm meets the requirements of the European directives, but did not comply with the gold-plating by MAFF officials. I wonder if the attention of the Editor of *Hansard* could be drawn to that fact.

Madam Speaker: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would also like to draw his point to the Minister's attention. It is hardly a point of order for me, but it is a matter for the Minister.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Have you had any information from the Department of Trade and Industry about a statement on the announcement by the gas regulator that some 10,000 British Gas TransCo jobs, many of them located in my constituency, may go as a result of her arbitrary new pricing decision? Frankly, the consumers and the employees of British Gas are caught between Cedric the pig and the unaccountable Clare "Spotted-dick"—

Madam Speaker: Order. That is not a matter for me. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to raise that matter on an Adjournment debate, I shall be glad to consider any application he makes. All hon. Members know that if a statement is to be made by the Government, a notice appears on the annunciator screen by 1 o'clock so that we are all aware of it.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. We were all grateful to you for your statement on 19 January 1995 in response to a legitimate complaint from the hon. Member for Southwark and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes). In that statement, you said that

"a Member whose constituency is directly affected by an answer should be informed of the answer at the same time as the Member who has asked the question and the press."

You also said that

"It would also be a useful courtesy if any Member tabling a question directly affecting another's constituency—something which should not be done lightly in any case—took care to inform that Member of the action that he or she has taken."—[*Official Report*, 19 January 1995; Vol. 252, c. 862.]

This morning, I had a two-and-a-half-hour meeting with the staff of Salisbury tax office to try to stave off its closure by the Board of Inland Revenue. The staff told me at 12.30 today that a parliamentary question had been tabled by the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce). Despite my parliamentary questions and ministerial correspondence, he felt it necessary to do that. He did not inform me and I confirmed with his office as soon as I arrived in the Palace of Westminster that he had not sought to inform me. The hon. Gentleman tabled five parliamentary questions about my constituency without contacting me. If he had, I would have advised him to get in touch with the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown), whose tax office is also threatened with closure.

Will you, Madam Speaker, confirm the views that you expressed in January 1995?

Madam Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has given the House the date when I made that statement and the column reference, which is 862. That statement still stands and it is very firm. Members who table a question directly about another Member's constituency, which should not be done lightly, should in any case take care to inform the other Member in advance that they are going to do so. Such matters should be resolved between Members and should not come to the Chair of the House, especially after firm statements have been made about how we should conduct ourselves in the Chamber.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark and Bermondsey) *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Is the hon. Gentleman going to apologise for his colleague?

Mr. Hughes: I have not spoken to my colleague, but may I accept what you say and explain one point to the House and to you, Madam Speaker, which may require you to adjudicate again and we may be able to respond in the way that you have indicated? My assumption is that my colleague, who is our Treasury spokesman, will have asked questions about a tax office in—

Madam Speaker: Order. That is not a point of order. I made it clear in 1995 that if questions are to be asked, which should not be done lightly, the Member should be informed. The hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) was informed about the questions when he saw them on the Order Paper. That is not the way to behave. I will hear no more points of order about that matter because every Member knows how strongly I feel about it. We shall now get on with our business.

Opposition Day

[12TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Northern Ireland Economy

3.38 pm

Sir James Molyneaux (Lagan Valley): I beg to move,

That this House takes note of the Northern Ireland Economic Council's Report No. 118, February 1996.

The report named in our motion is an assessment of the implications of the 1995 Budget on Northern Ireland. Lest anyone should assume that I am going to plead a special case for our part of the United Kingdom or, worse still, advocate a separate tax regime for the Province, let me make it clear that my party accepts some responsibility for that Budget. During the debate on the Queen's Speech on 22 November 1995, I ventured to tender advice to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who was then reaching his firm and final decisions on the contents of his Budget. My subsequent support during the Budget debate for the Chancellor's proposals was in line with my party's consistent policy since it was forced to become a separate party in Parliament.

We are in the happy position of finding ourselves broadly in alignment with the Treasury team in reducing the national debt, reducing the public sector borrowing requirement, maintaining the Government's excellent record on low inflation and avoiding a fixed exchange rate. On that final issue, my party's policy pre-dates the debate on a common currency. Our policy is based on a firm conviction that although a common currency can work within a nation—an example was given recently by the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), who observed that the economies of London and Liverpool are vastly different, with the former giving assistance to the latter—a uniform currency for sovereign nations flies in the face of common sense. As a party, my colleagues and I derive reassurance from the convergence of the Government and the Opposition on most of the principles to which I have referred, and economic policies.

I have sketched in the national background to our financial structures so that we can examine the position of one part of the nation, which in this instance is the Northern Ireland component. In examining budgetary effects on Northern Ireland, we must look beyond the current year to the decade ahead. One Budget is little more than a blip; it represents a modest shift in balance which has a limited effect, in the long term, on the nation or any part thereof. That is not to say, however, that we should ignore the fact that even a tilt of a few degrees can seriously damage any one of the regions of the United Kingdom.

It is in that sense that the report of the Northern Ireland Economic Council reveals an unnoticed and probably unintentional disadvantage to the Province. The report observes that while newsworthy proposals such as duties on petrol, cigarettes and alcohol are highlighted, the distributional impact on incomes is rarely discussed.

There is an assumption that the Northern Ireland economy is a microcosm of the United Kingdom economy. The report renders a service in illustrating the fallacy of that assumption. Incomes in Northern Ireland

are lower than those in the rest of the United Kingdom. For a variety of reasons, the social security system is a more significant source of income than it is elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

Sir George Quigley, the chairman of the economic council, has stated:

"Given that the changes announced in the Budget tend to favour high earners and that the level of household income is on average lower in Northern Ireland than in the United Kingdom, it is not altogether surprising that Northern Ireland households benefit less from the tax and benefit changes contained in the 1995 Budget than their United Kingdom counterparts."

I am not advocating split-level taxation. However, given Sir George's assessment, which points to a loss to the Northern Ireland economy in total, there is a case for taking the factor into account when the Chief Secretary to the Treasury embarks on his consultations before setting out his public expenditure proposals, and especially the Northern Ireland allocation.

It might be appropriate to note the concern expressed over public expenditure plans for the next three years. Whatever Government are in power, the closing years of the century will see a tightening of resources. If the undesirable effects of that are to be avoided and if the targeting of social needs is to achieve its objectives, we must embark on a concerted drive to achieve lasting long-term expansion of the Ulster economy.

Given the inevitability of continual reduction in public finances throughout the years to come, greater use must be made of the public finance initiative. We have already seen examples of capital projects launched well in advance of the date when public finance would be available. I accept that the move from being a service provider to being a purchaser of services places the Government in a position in which they may be replacing a short-term capital commitment with a long-term revenue commitment, but I have great faith in the private sector—particularly in Northern Ireland—and I do not think that it is beyond the capacity of that sector to design measures to avoid that very trap. For the Government, the great bonus is the easing of the pressure on the public sector borrowing requirement, on which we are all broadly agreed in the House.

In a recent study, our party proposed a merging of the various agencies that deal with indigenous business. We suggested that the Industrial Development Board should be encouraged and assisted in its role of attracting inward investment. When I use the words "encouraged and assisted", I am thinking particularly of the back-up structure that has been considered by Northern Ireland Ministers during past months, in the shape of an all-party council based in both Houses of Parliament. We would strongly support such a system, which would have enormous influence abroad and would put Northern Ireland's industrial capacity in the front rank. Nearer to home, there is much scope for co-operation. Without prejudice to England and Wales, we are planning to step up links with Scotland, our nearest neighbour—so near, indeed, as to be visible across the narrow sea.

Let me interrupt my train of thought at this point, and mention another hobby horse of mine—the enterprise investment scheme that was introduced in the 1993 Budget. The object of the scheme was, and still is, to encourage small investors to support small companies. It has great potential in Northern Ireland, but there should and could be a much greater take-up. Perhaps it could be facilitated by a degree of security for investors. I know that that kind of step may prove difficult, but it should not be impossible. If it proves difficult, perhaps more attractive tax concessions would have the desired effect—throughout the United Kingdom, that is.

For the benefit of the hon. Member for Greenock and Port Glasgow (Dr. Godman), let me return to the subject of Scotland. My hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) returned yesterday from a duty visit to Glasgow, and I was privileged to engage in discussions there during two weekends in April. Never was the Scottish dimension as real as it has been in recent weeks, with Scottish and Ulster farmers making common cause in the beef crisis. On behalf of my colleagues, let me pay tribute to the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond), who has worked closely with my hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Mr. Beggs) in taking steps to ease the plight of beef farmers on both sides of the Irish sea.

The Scottish dimension is based on a common sense of values, on mutual understanding and on hard-headed business expertise and experience. There is no need for cross-channel structures; no clamour to find a solution. Ulster's relationship with Scotland provides a perfect example of two peoples united, not divided, by the sea, and existing in an atmosphere of trust and friendship. We hope that, sooner or later, we can develop the same relationship with the nation on our southern frontier.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Port Glasgow): The right hon. Gentleman has spoken of the relationship between Northern Ireland and Scotland. What does his party think of the idea of a ferry service linking Ballycastle with Campbeltown and the Mull of Kintyre? The town and the Mull of Kintyre would definitely benefit economically from such a link.

Sir James Molyneaux: We have always supported that project and I think that that applies to my colleagues on the Benches in front of me. We will do anything that we can, again in co-operation with our friends in Scotland, to bring it about because we take the view that the more numerous, effective and efficient the links are between Scotland and Northern Ireland, and thereby between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the better it will be for both our countries.

We hope that, sooner or later, we can develop the same relationship with the nation on our southern frontier, which left the United Kingdom earlier this century. Some day, the path of reunification of the British Isles may become a reality—and, if it does, we really will have a common currency that would work—but that course may become realistic later this year, when the latest initiative, misnamed the "peace process", has run its course.

That is not to suggest that those of us without ringside seats at that circus should stand around with bated breath. Far from it—we have a continuing duty to co-operate with the Government, the Opposition and the other parties in this Parliament to ensure that the work of the Queen's Government continues before and after a general election. It is that continuing certainty that will, more than anything else, create stability and settled conditions, which in turn will vastly improve the economic prospects for Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom, to which the greater number of Protestants, Roman Catholics, people of other faiths and of none wish simply to belong.

3.51 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Sir John Wheeler): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir J. Molyneaux) on the way in which he introduced the debate. I listened with interest to what he said and I look forward to the contributions that will follow. The Government share the view that the matters discussed in the Northern Ireland Economic Council report are of great importance to all the people of Northern Ireland. It is therefore a subject worthy of careful debate.

I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's remarks about low taxation and inflation. I am not sure, however, whether this afternoon's events will confirm his belief that there is a complete convergence between Her Majesty's Opposition and the Government on the economy's management, but that will perhaps be revealed to the House later.

I should like to take this opportunity to express the Government's appreciation of the council's work—not only the report under consideration, but the wider body of reports that it has produced over the years. The council was established by Government as an independent advisory body in 1977. Over the years, it has exercised its independent role effectively and it continues to be a valuable source of external comment and advice. The Government find its contributions a useful and thought-provoking stimulus to the process of policy formulation and review, although, naturally, we do not always agree with all its analyses and recommendations.

On 31 March, I wrote to Sir George Quigley, the council's chairman, to express our thanks for the report on the 1995 Budget and its implications for Northern Ireland. In doing so, I was pleased to acknowledge that the report provides useful summaries of the background to the Budget, as seen from both the national and regional perspectives, and of the economic characteristics of Northern Ireland households, to which the right hon. Gentleman has referred.

I was encouraged to note the council's overall conclusion in paragraph 6.8 of the report that the net effect of the expenditure and tax changes in the Budget is likely to be "slightly expansionist" in terms of the Northern Ireland economy and that that should "enhance growth opportunities". Right hon. and hon. Members will doubtless wish to comment on a number of points in the report, and it is worth reminding ourselves of the background.

Recent trends in the Northern Ireland economy have been extremely positive. Unemployment has fallen over an extended period and employment is at is highest ever level, although those are not the only encouraging signs. The council's report recognises that the Northern Ireland economy has performed better than the United Kingdom economy as a whole on a number of important indicators. Given the relative positions that have obtained in the past, this is to be warmly welcomed.

It is a statement of the obvious, but no less relevant for that, that the restoration of the Provisional IRA ceasefire and progress towards political development would have immensely beneficial effects on the Northern Ireland economy. No one can be unaware that violence has had an appallingly destructive effect on the Province's economic development over the past 25 years. That is why we continue to do all that we can to encourage political progress, and it is why the whole community looks to all parties and interests to create the peace and stability which are the essential prerequisites for economic growth. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Minister of State will say more about this when he responds to the debate.

I have a particular interest, because of my responsibility for the Department of Finance and Personnel, in what the council's report says about public expenditure. The background to its comments on public spending is well known, but they bear repetition. Northern Ireland's needs have been and continue to be higher than the rest of the United Kingdom's, and that is recognised in the higher levels of public expenditure in the region. The comparisons are not always straightforward and need to be treated with some caution, as the report acknowledges, but identifiable public expenditure in Northern Ireland was some 32 per cent. higher in 1994-95, the last year for which the comparison is currently available, than the UK average.

That is a very broad comparison, but it none the less confirms that there is a substantial, although I believe justifiable, differential in recognition of the region's particular circumstances. There are, for instance, proportionately very high levels of expenditure on law and order and industrial development, as one would expect, given the events of the past 25 years.

The report refers to the fact that the Northern Ireland allocation for the current year, 1996-97, is over £8 billion. That is a substantial allocation in the context of the need for tight control over public finances. The report also notes that planned savings in the law and order budget resulting from the paramilitary ceasefires—totalling some £286 million over the period 1995-96 to 1998-99—have been reallocated within the Northern Ireland bloc rather than subtracted from it.

Dr. Godman: The Minister mentions the reallocation of funds. Does he support the idea of a ferry service between Ballycastle and Campbeltown? Naturally, I would prefer such a service to link with Greenock, but in the meantime I would happily settle for a service between the Mull of Kintyre and Northern Ireland.

Sir John Wheeler: The principle of such a service is interesting and it is almost certainly desirable. The question of how it would be funded would have to be carefully considered. I am, of course, aware of the degree of concern there is among the residents of Rathlin island and of Ballycastle about their ferry service. Those matters have to be looked at in the round and with very great care as to the implications for public expenditure.

The amount of money redeployed as a result of the terrorist ceasefires is some £286 million, which is a substantial demonstration of the practical effect of the Prime Minister's undertaking in October 1994. The Government will take full account of Northern Ireland's special needs in setting levels of public spending for the Province.

The tragedy is that those reallocations, which the report refers to as the public expenditure element of the peace dividend, are at risk because of the breakdown of the Provisional IRA ceasefire. My right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State made it clear, in announcing the outcome of the 1994 and 1995 public expenditure surveys, that the reallocations to economic and social programmes were necessarily contingent on the working assumption of peace.

The reallocations would, self-evidently, have to be reversed if expenditure on police overtime and compensation were to rise towards their previous levels. If that were to happen, those responsible for terrorist violence would effectively destroy jobs as well as depriving the health service, the education service and all other programmes of resources that could be applied to the benefit of the whole community. The people of Northern Ireland would not forgive them for that.

Sir George Quigley's foreword makes it clear that the report was completed before the breakdown of the PIRA ceasefire. He rightly observed that the economy was beginning to

"reap significant benefits from the prospect of a permanent and durable peace",

and emphasised the need to search for a solution that will consolidate and enhance the gains made during the period of the ceasefire. I endorse those sentiments and re-emphasise the Government's commitment to that search.

The report also suggested that there should be a debate about public expenditure priorities in the context of peace and stability. I earnestly hope that the situation will develop in ways which make that debate relevant, and I am sure that the Government will play their part in it. My right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office may say more about the report's comments on targeting social need when he speaks later.

The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley also spoke about such targeting. I entirely agree with his remarks about taking full advantage of the private finance initiative, and I can assure him that the Government are actively examining the possible use of PFI projects in sectors including water and sewerage, health, education, roads, transport and information technology.

On the broader focus of the council's report, it is indisputable that the economic well-being of Northern Ireland is intimately linked to the performance of the United Kingdom economy. The 1995 Budget was a carefully balanced package designed to protect and promote growth in the UK economy. It included a reduction in the basic rate of income tax, lower tax on savings income, an increase in the lower-rate band well ahead of inflation and continued tight control of public expenditure.

The Budget was designed to put money back into the pockets of ordinary taxpayers—to let them keep more of what they earn and what they save. That was as welcome to taxpayers in Northern Ireland as to taxpayers in Great Britain. It was also designed to keep inflation under control, as that is a key to protecting the economic interests of the entire population.

Sir James Molyneaux: Does the Minister realise that I was, in a sense, throwing him a lifeline when I suggested that it should be drawn to the attention of the Chief Secretary to the Treasury that the United Kingdom and Great Britain have many more high earners per 1,000 of the population than we have in Northern Ireland and that the benefits accruing to the economy on the bigger island are therefore much greater? It is a rather delicate suggestion but perhaps it might be of some help to him when he is bargaining, not for an enhanced slice of the cake but for a fair share of the cake when it comes to the carve-up in the autumn.

Sir John Wheeler: I was especially grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for the courteous and careful way in which he threw the lifeline and assure him that his fine words will be enthusiastically deployed along the line that he suggests in the coming debates at the Treasury.

I emphasise the fact that we have continued to sustain Northern Ireland public expenditure at levels which take account of the region's unemployment and other problems. This manifests itself in a number of ways. We continue to commit substantial resources to industrial development including inward investment; we have large training and employment programmes and have been piloting a scheme for the long-term unemployed; and the social security programme is running at some £3.1 billion in the current year. Our policies therefore address the whole community, not only those in work.

The report refers to the council's intention to stimulate a debate on the degree of fiscal autonomy that regional governments might have. Clearly, this is a legitimate area of public discussion and the Government will follow the debate with interest. I must point out, however, that the unified taxation system has served Northern Ireland well over the years, and the report itself acknowledges that the Province continues to benefit from substantial fiscal transfers within the United Kingdom system.

I would therefore argue that Northern Ireland's interests need to be judged in the light of all the relevant factors, and in the round, rather than on a piecemeal, measure-by-measure basis. If that broader assessment is made, I believe that it is clear that the Province is treated fairly while still being subject to the same disciplines and constraints that apply throughout the United Kingdom.

To sum up, the Northern Ireland economy has performed well in recent years. There have been a number of welcome successes on the industrial development front over the past year, and we have recently seen substantial private sector investment in new hotels. I am sure that all contributors to this debate will share our wish to see those trends continued, and I look forward to a constructive debate on the important issues raised by the council report.

4.7 pm

Mr. John Hume (Foyle): I should like to express my deep appreciation to the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir J. Molyneaux) for putting this matter on the agenda as it deserves a great deal of discussion at this particular time, given that there is substantial common ground among the various parties in Northern Ireland. I wish to deal first with a subject which the right hon. Gentleman mentioned and which is causing a serious economic crisis in our community, but which has not received sufficient attention: bovine spongiform encephalopathy.

BSE has created one of the worst economic crises in the lifetime of our citizens. Unlike in other regions of Britain, agriculture is our largest industry, and the community as a whole, but especially rural towns and villages, is heavily dependent on it and on the beef industry. We believe that we have a special case and that the problem in Northern Ireland is very different from that in Britain. For example, the incidence of BSE in Northern Ireland is less than one tenth of that in Great Britain. The rate of incidence of BSE in Northern Ireland has been declining rapidly, and international observers have agreed

[Mr. John Hume]

that measures taken to control it have been extremely effective. The farm quality assurance scheme in Northern Ireland provides an effective guarantee that beef that is given that assurance is free from BSE and from BSE-free herds.

The computerised tracing system that operates in Northern Ireland is regarded as one of the most advanced in the world. It ensures that every animal can be traced from birth to slaughter. That enables the strictest possible control to be exercised over cattle. Other regions have much to learn from the forward thinking of people in Northern Ireland's agriculture and beef industries.

There is a powerful case for special status for Northern Ireland, to be put to the Council of Ministers and the European Commission, given our dependence on the industry and the special relationship that I have just described. I appeal to the Minister—as he knows, my party and the Ulster Unionist party have put this request to him before—to reconsider putting that case directly to the Council of Ministers.

With regard to the broader political scene, I agree totally with the Minister that peace on our streets has an enormous role to play in developing our economy, given what we have lost over the past 25 years because of the violence and troubles. The 18 months of peace demonstrated the mood that has developed and the opportunities to translate the massive international good will, which has clearly emerged in Europe and the United States, into real benefits at an economic level for our people. There is a major opportunity to do that and I hope that there will soon be a restoration of the ceasefire so that, in that totally peaceful atmosphere, all our energies can be harnessed to aid economic development.

As I said, there is substantial common ground among the different parties in Northern Ireland on the economy. Indeed, when the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley was leader of the Ulster Unionist party, we met, and our parties met, and we began a process to discuss matters of common interest. I certainly hope that, as the peace process and the talks process continue—we all recognise the difficulties in the political arena—we shall work closely together on the economy to develop the trust that will help us in the more difficult political field.

In working together on the economy, we have an enormous amount of international good will on which to call to help us build economic success. As we know, the European Union has designated a special programme of development for Northern Ireland. Through its President and at every level, right across its communities, the United States has expressed its enormous willingness to help us on the economic front.

There are two major areas in which we can take advantage of that enormous good will of the United States—marketing the products of our indigenous small companies and seeking inward investment. I have some experience of both of them in my constituency, because we set up a local body, whose members are drawn from both sections of the community, to market the products of our small companies in America, using our contacts there, and to seek inward investment.

As the Minister knows, there has been substantial recent success. We have attracted 2,500 jobs into my constituency from the American investment, and using that international good will over the past few years, initial orders from the 200 small companies from all sections of Northern Ireland that I have taken to the United States to market their products, have been worth £42 million. That underlines the enormous opportunity that is now out there for us, to harness the massive international good will and sympathy for our situation in Northern Ireland. A ceasefire is, of course, an essential element in greatly strengthening that good will and sympathy, so that real benefits for our people are created through the marketing of our small companies' products and inward investment.

As we know, the European Union has designated a special programme for us. When the peace process started and United States representatives and the late Secretary of Commerce were offering us economic assistance, my party and I suggested that, as other countries have it as part of peace processes in other parts of the world, they recognised Northern Ireland and the border counties as a duty-free zone for imports into the United States. I understand that that proposal is being seriously considered and I know, from my personal contacts, that there is substantial support for it in Washington. That would give Northern Ireland an enormous boost.

Other regions might think that Northern Ireland is getting an advantage. However, we are trying to cure the disadvantage that we have had over the past 25 years. If we can persuade the American Senate and Congress to give us that duty-free status—as a result, products made in our area would be imported duty free into the United States—it will be an enormous boost to our industrial development. We have the potential to achieve that status if the Government support us in our request to the United States—I hope that they do.

As I said previously, I hope that we shall work together on common ground in relation to our economic future, both in Europe and in the United States, to bring the economic benefits to both sections of our community and to break down the barriers of prejudice and distrust that stand between us in the more difficult political arena.

4.15 pm

Mr. A. Cecil Walker (Belfast, North): As one who was born and brought up in Belfast, I am proud that it is again defining fresh frontiers of industrial, economic and social achievement. Towards the close of the previous century, Belfast was the source and centre of a high-volume flow of new technologies and materials. It transferred goods to the furthest corners of the globe. Its first factories were the largest and most advanced spinning and weaving mills of the time, using the finest cloths and linens.

Commodities and people were exported abroad on ships that were built in Harland and Wolff. The fastest and most luxurious ocean liners were first thought of, and subsequently designed and constructed here. The city became a location for entrepreneurs who managed, manufactured and marketed their ideas, their products and their talents to Europe, to the far east and to America. Many of them became part of the great wave of emigrants who left for the shores of the United States in the 19th century.

Today is a new time, with new opportunities. Once again, Belfast is resuming its place as a driver of economic regeneration and growth. Ambitious projects for the transformation of established areas within the city—such as the Gasworks, Springvale and Laganside

developments—are providing imaginative investment opportunities. Schemes such as the development of Lagan weir and Clarendon dock are being undertaken by Laganside Corporation and are ensuring that the river's significance is not posthumous, but progressive; not former, but future.

That physical development is another sign of the city's increase in capacity and of its confidence in itself. Laganbank is a superb example. It is an entirely new development, which will cost approximately £130 million and which will be completed, appropriately, in 2000. The main elements include a 2,250-seat conference and concert hall, signifying the close relations between commerce and culture in the city; a 1,350-space multi-storey car park; a 200-bedroom four-star hotel; 500,000 sq ft of office space; and 70,000 sq ft of speciality and festival shopping.

Another example of Belfast engineering at its finest is the imposing £65 million cross-harbour bridge, named after William Dargan, who built the first rail bridge in Ireland. The Dargan bridge is a clear demonstration of the city's commitment to maintaining and developing the kind of up-to-the-minute transportation and communications network essential for companies seeking access to or seeking further to consolidate their position in the international fast lane of modern industrial economies.

Belfast is a city that is constantly reinventing itself in terms of its workplaces and work forces. Companies such as Ford, whose commitment to Belfast spans many years, have been joined by investors from Britain, Europe, North America and the Pacific and Asian countries, who realise the benefits of a flexible, well-educated and motivated population of 300,000 people from which to recruit their personnel.

Belfast is the nexus for a transport and communications infrastructure unrivalled by any European city of equivalent size. A major freight port with a brand new terminal and a roll-on/roll-off facilities, Belfast is also connected by an excellent motorway and trunk road system to every other port in Northern Ireland. The main railway station integrates the whole of Northern Ireland, and there are two major airports with links to Great Britain, Europe and America. Passengers and products can easily be transported to any of those areas.

Belfast is a young city on an ancient site, and its local and global importance has always been linked to its position as a centre of communications and capital. Many of its past industries were linked to the transport of goods, of ideas and of technologies. Shipbuilding is the first and most obvious example, ropemaking a related second and the design and construction of light aircraft a more recent third. The manufacture of linen, which consolidated Belfast's significance as a major city in the 19th and 20th century, would have been unimaginable without the port and harbour that link it to world markets.

Times have changed. The industrial revolution, which laid the foundation for Belfast's sphere of influence, shaped its architectural profile and created the wealth of many of its citizens, has been superseded by a new information age.

Ironically, Belfast has figured once again as a centre of public communications networks, for the past 25 years have put it firmly in the spotlight of international media attention. Nevertheless, during much of that period there has been a relentless, if understandable, decline in investment activity, industrial growth and stability of employment.

Identifying problems is one way of helping to eradicate them. Although the legacy of problems confronting Belfast is by no means likely to disappear overnight, there is no reason to suppose that they are any more difficult than those of any other major European city.

In its key document, "Opportunities for All", Belfast city council outlined an economic development strategy for the years 1995 to 2000, in which it pinpointed information as the lodestone of a new gateway to and prosperity for its citizens. It was felt that Belfast was in a position to promote itself once again as an urban and national business for a global network of public and business intelligence and information systems.

Obviously, the term "information" is the site for many competing definitions and applications. What do we mean when we speak of Belfast as a city of information? To start with, Belfast has an established and worldwide reputation for the accuracy, low-cost production and high integrity of its software development industries. They have evolved so rapidly in the past decade that they provide employment for 10,000 people, and trends suggest that they have the potential to increase that figure substantially.

One of the side effects of having access to the idioms and technology of software development is an increasing dispersal of expertise and energy into the associated fields of interest, with the result that Belfast has become a centre of excellence for the generation of information networks, which helps business concerns to compete and operate more cost-effectively.

Telematics is another area of research and production in which Belfast has specialised recently. Defined as the integration of telecommunications and computers in a way that suits business requirements, telematics merges the practicalities of software development with the latest advances in computing intelligence, to facilitate the free exchange of information between computers on a local and wide area network. The development and production of the means of enabling extensive electronic links situates Belfast firmly on the frontiers of the new planetary map of information science and industry. We are building on the extensive computer training programmes put in place by the Government.

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the best features of the telecommunications and computer industries is the fact that they employ many new graduates? For far too long, we have exported our best graduates and our best brains and now, for the first time in many years, many of them are able to find jobs at home. That can only be good for Northern Ireland in the long term.

Mr. Walker: I thank my hon. Friend for those remarks. He is absolutely right about graduates, but other training programmes are training people who are less well educated for work in the telecommunications industry. Those programmes are off the ground in Belfast and they are working well.

Belfast city council, with support from BT, has lent its support to two major training initiatives—we call them EDITRAIN initiatives—in west and in east Belfast,

[Mr. Walker]

which are areas of very high unemployment. Anticipating an increased demand for skilled operators in that field—this is relevant to my hon. Friend's earlier remarks about training—the council has approved a procedure whereby individuals receive training up to national vocational qualification standard level 4. That enables them to install and to supervise the smooth running of network information systems as an integral part of a larger corporate team. There are several and substantial markets for such specialist graduates as most companies, large and small, require their services and expertise. Almost all the major banks and insurance companies are part of extensive network systems, which are usually headquartered in London.

Belfast is an information city that has transformed its past into a strategy for the future. That strategy has given its citizens a clear sense of continuity, a coherent set of objectives and a growing confidence in the common goal of a better life for us all. For the business man and woman, the promotion and implementation of the strategy in the form of specialised training, consultative bodies and a climate of information literacy and technological competence, represents new frontiers of economic opportunity. There is already a talented and motivated work force. Low-cost accommodation and telecommunications, combined with the development of both satellite and terrestrial broad-band services, will assist the economy dramatically.

One of Belfast's most striking features is the number and range of organisations that are active in the field of economic development. In the past 15 years, a complex network of agencies has developed across the statutory, community and private sectors. That reflects in part the changing economic climate and the change in Government policy that promoted enterprise as a means of tackling unemployment, while reflecting also the communities' desire to take some action to create work.

Within the statutory sector, the Department of Economic Development family—the Local Enterprise Development Unit, the Industrial Development Board and the Training and Employment Agency—has invested heavily in infrastructure, training and business support in order to promote a positive environment and to encourage business information and growth. Parallel with that, the Department of the Environment and its agents, the Belfast Development Office and Making Belfast Work, have invested heavily—with MBW particularly prominent through the efforts of the Belfast action team. Complementing that, development at community level is evident through the establishment of local and enterprise agencies, community employment regeneration schemes and development organisations. The International Fund for Ireland was a prime mover in that. Further activity is generated by organisations that are more closely aligned to the voluntary and community sector, where youth, women's enterprise and community economic development initiatives can readily be found.

A case in point was the recent conference held at the Balmoral conference centre and sponsored by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action. More than 175 participants discussed economic and social regeneration involving local people. It was a positive, constructive and bridge-building exercise that was worthy of support as it addressed specific employment problems, using the imaginative Donnison report, which will be published shortly, as an agenda for action.

Belfast continues to be the centre of economic activity for much of Northern Ireland. Although it has only 18 per cent. of the total population of the Province, it has 30 per cent. of Northern Ireland's manufacturing companies and 21 per cent. of its retail activity.

In the past decade, Belfast has enjoyed massive infrastructure investment that is estimated at approximately £800 million. Projects range from new housing to commercial offices and shopping arcades. Considerable capital has also gone into bolstering the internal and external transport infrastructure, which now ranks with the best in Europe. As I said, the road and rail networks in the Province meet the most advanced national and international standards, but the weak links are the west link junctions, which cause serious traffic and environmental pollution problems, particularly in respect of cross-border containers using Belfast harbour port.

Unemployment continues to be a major problem, and in some wards half the work force is out of a job. The problem is far worse among men, and in some neighbourhoods as many as six out of 10 are unemployed. Although unemployment in Belfast is not as severe as in other parts of the Province, it fares worse than most comparable cities in the United Kingdom. Despite a fall in the population of the city between 1981 and 1991, current trends reveal that the rising youth population entering the labour market is imposing further pressure on jobs.

Within the broad scheme of community economic development, the city council's emphasis clearly will be focused on promoting sustainable employment. At community level, that will be reflected in support for training, capacity building and the promotion of new models of economic activity and employment. In respect of priority groups, emphasis will be placed on programmes and initiatives that encourage and support enterprise and access to employment and improve employability.

On that theme, the city council has set out the following aims: to encourage wealth creation by supporting economic development at community level; to identify and work with priority groups to promote and encourage greater access to employment and enterprise; to promote the spread of good practice and the sharing of experience at community level; and to promote the potential opportunities presented by information technology in providing sustainable jobs at community level. To achieve those aims, Belfast city council will seek to undertake and support programmes in partnership with interested parties, for which full support will be required from the Government and their respective agencies.

4.33 pm

Mr. Eddie McGrady (South Down): The subject of today's debate is the report on the background and implications for Northern Ireland of the 1995 United Kingdom Budget. It is important to draw the attention of the House to the broad conclusions of that report which have not been mentioned so far this afternoon. The conclusion of part I of the report states, at paragraph 3.28:

"Incomes in Northern Ireland are lower than in the UK. Moreover benefits as a source of income are much more important in Northern Ireland. Consequently a budget which aims to finance tax reductions

through reductions in benefit expenditure will have a disproportionate impact on Northern Ireland, particularly if the targets for cuts are unemployment or sick and disabled benefits."

The same theme is found in part II:

"If Budget changes were assessed in terms of the Government of Northern Ireland public policy priority TSN"—

tackling social need—

"then serious concerns would have to be voiced. Those that gain the most are the better off, while households that are in the lower income deciles actually experience a fall in their income".

The conclusions also indicate that, in Northern Ireland, the richest 10 per cent. of households will gain from the Budget, but that 50 per cent. of households will suffer losses. That may not have come across clearly this afternoon. I want to dwell, for a moment, on that deprivation.

The report's conclusions hide reality and additional deprivation—the deep disparities in areas of extremely long-term unemployment that have existed for not just one, but two, decades. Those areas have also been deprived for more than two decades of the infrastructure necessary to enable them to take advantage of any industrial revival that may occur as a result of inward investment.

Certain areas of Northern Ireland do exceptionally well; others continue to do exceptionally badly. If the Government have a genuine policy of targeting social need, they must address that problem. If there is a loss of 200 to 300 jobs in place A, an emergency team is sent there to see how the area can be revitalised and to attract new investment. In areas of endemic long-term unemployment, no such task force is contemplated. Perhaps it is thought, "They are used to it, so they will not gripe about it," or, "They do not deserve it."

The report also hides the concept of a low-wage economy, which we should not accept. The Northern Ireland economy should be based on maximum efficiency in which the producers of wealth—capital and labour—share equally in the benefits. It should not be low wages that attract inward investment, but a quality work force, quality management and a quality product. Northern Ireland does not want a far east economy that attracts European and north American investment simply to exploit low wages. There is a tendency to sell Northern Ireland as a low-wage economy. We should sell its other attractions, and the wage earner should share in the prosperity that results from inward investment.

The Minister spoke about the peace dividend. I am not qualified to follow the intricacies of the public accounts system, but there is some disappointment in the north of Ireland that the substantial savings made in respect of Northern Ireland's security requirements have not been funnelled into other areas of expenditure. If, as the Minister says, funds were channelled into other areas of expenditure—God help us! If there had been no peace dividend, our education and health systems would have collapsed around us. The Minister who is to reply to this debate knows that we are already running a £100 million deficit in what is called the educational estate—the fabric of the education system. If, as he suggests, money has gone into the system from the peace dividend, that implies that the deficit would have been much greater.

The Minister responsible for health and social services issued his public expenditure statement on 24 February last, claiming an increase of £54 million in his budget; but he failed to take it into account that £42 million of that was already tied up in required additional expenditure under new legislation—especially that to do with child support and certain renal health requirements. He correctly stated that a 3 per cent. cut was wanted, of which 1.5 per cent. would come from cash and 1.5 per cent. from services. I can tell Ministers that those cuts in services are already being made, and will get worse as time passes.

The Economic Council report states that there is more ill health in Northern Ireland than elsewhere. If this 3 per cent. cut is to be implemented next year, and possibly the year after, there is no doubt in anyone's mind—from consultant to patient—that the system will collapse.

The problem of perception remains: either the peace dividend was not used or, if it was, budgets have been much more severely cut than has hitherto been admitted publicly.

Job creation and inward investment are essential factors in the equation. The Industrial Development Board and, to a lesser extent, the Local Enterprise Development Unit, have done a reasonable job. I have been one of their major critics in the past, not because they are not doing their job but because they do not distribute jobs fairly around Northern Ireland. We hear much in Northern Ireland about fair employment, but it would be better implemented if employment were also located more equitably. Between 1990 and 1995, 43 new enterprises were brought to Northern Ireland—according to the IDB. Sixteen district councils benefited from them, but the three district councils in my constituency received no benefit whatever as far as I can tell and, of the 315 inward investment first-time visitations during the fiscal year 1994-95, only eight came to the south-east, to South Down. That is not an equitable distribution of jobs in an area of deprivation, long-term unemployment and health difficulties. In addition, ours is a rural community that has to cope with the advent of BSE and the onslaught on our fishing industry.

None of this, however, has prompted the IDB, LEDU or the Government to do anything special for my area. The Governments of other countries seem to manage successfully to apportion varying amounts of grant aid; it is even done elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Why cannot the same be done in parts of Northern Ireland?

As for the policy of decentralisation, there appears to be a steady tendency to draw jobs into central Belfast—it seems to act like a magnet—but such jobs are urgently required to sustain rural communities. Moreover, the agency externalisation process, now under way in all Government Departments, is slowly but surely drawing jobs into the centre and away from the periphery. That applies all over Northern Ireland, not just in my area. That, too, needs to be considered in the context of the targeting of areas of social need.

It may be difficult to attract industrial inward development to an area such as mine, but there should be no difficulty about drawing in tourists to the rural areas of Northern Ireland, in the west and the south-east. I am puzzled by the fact that the Northern Ireland tourist board appears to lack the money to implement the policies that it would like to put into effect. Last year—1995-96—the board's budget went mainly on building big hotels. But the average tourist does not want a big hotel, or its prices. He wants a small family-run guest house or bed and breakfast; he cannot afford a posh five-star hotel.

[Mr. Eddie McGrady]

I am talking about our bread-and-butter tourists, not about the flashy conference tourists who never come back. The kind to whom I am referring will return time and again, bringing their families with them. In the year to 31 March, no grant aid was available for small guest houses. Many in my constituency applied, but the door was slammed in their face. Something must urgently be done about the shortfall of accommodation for tourists in our area. Last summer, there was not a spare bed to be had, and we had to send people across the border. That is criminal.

Industrial inward investment, tourism and indigenous expansion are the three pillars on which we hope to build a better future. As far as the first goes, we must do something about the cost of energy. The Northern Ireland Committee looked into the problem in some detail last year and issued a report, but we seem to be hidebound by rules and regulations and by contracts entered into up to 2010. The officer who controls prices must therefore take immediate action to make inward investment in Northern Ireland much more attractive.

I shall end by renewing my plea not to turn Northern Ireland into a low-wage economy. We need an economy based on a standard quality of production and greater efficiency. That is the best way to attract inward investment.

4.48 pm

Mr. Eric Illsley (Barnsley, Central): Right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House have agreed today that progress in the peace process in Northern Ireland will be greatly assisted by progress in economic development in the Province. Unemployment, although now falling, has been at high levels and long-term and youth unemployment need to be addressed as they are still problematic. Training for work is another area in which progress must be made. Post-16 academic achievement in Northern Ireland is among the highest in the United Kingdom, but a substantial number of 16-year-olds leave school without any qualifications whatever. Training and education are especially important to counter any drift into violence or into the black economy.

As we have heard already, much progress has been made recently. Inward investment has brought new jobs to Northern Ireland, especially that by the companies Seagate and Daewoo, and in 1994-95 the Industrial Development Board successfully negotiated 10 inward investment projects, which promise to provide almost 2,000 jobs. The Local Enterprise Development Unit helped with about 13 new businesses and another 2,500 new jobs. I shall expand on some of the issues that I have just mentioned, especially training, education and unemployment, and suggest some of the Labour party's policy options to deal with them. I shall also refer to one or two other major problem areas, which have been touched on, including the beef industry and electricity prices in the Province.

Some 97 per cent. of businesses in Northern Ireland have fewer than 50 employees, so the small business sector is extremely important. Encouraging small businesses to start up, to expand and to take on new employees is a key factor in generating growth in jobs and income. The Labour party has been examining ways in which to assist small businesses, including the establishment of a network of commercially managed business development agencies for small businesses, which would raise private finance for long-term investment in small and medium-sized businesses, and a moratorium law, which would give small firms in financial difficulty the time to develop a rescue package and avoid unnecessary bankruptcy. We have also been examining ways in which small businesses can be saved from the dangers of late payment, together with measures to promote prompt payment and greater accountability on the part of public and private sector bodies. It is apparent that the Deputy Prime Minister does not share that attitude. Raising the VAT threshold for small businesses, if they take on a young, unemployed person, is another issue that the Labour party has been examining.

The latest figures from the Department of Economic Development show that, although some 29,000 people currently attend training schemes run by the Training and Employment Agency, more than 8,000 places on training schemes have not been filled. Why are those places remaining unfilled? Are the Government providing the training courses that business and industry actually require? In Northern Ireland, as in the rest of the United Kingdom, people are the country's greatest asset. Labour believes that the skills and abilities of the work force—a well-motivated, well-trained and well-qualified work force—will determine the Northern Ireland economy's ability to compete in the modern world.

It has been said in the past that nothing short of a skills revolution is required in Northern Ireland. That skills revolution requires that education and training move to the centre of economic policy. Northern Ireland needs an education and training system that enables all workers to retrain continually throughout their working lives. That will require a great expansion in education and training measures. The Government's approach—of leaving training to be developed by market forces—has, to a large extent, failed.

Labour's proposals on training will include new opportunities for retraining for people in work by ensuring that companies invest in upgrading the skills of their work force. Companies that fail to train to a certain standard will face a training levy. That factor has been highlighted recently by the problems experienced by Shorts following the collapse of Fokker. The economy in Belfast and Northern Ireland is likely to lose a number of skilled workers unless those who are made redundant from Shorts are retrained and their skills saved.

We propose a Northern Ireland skills audit that will be compared with information available for the whole island of Ireland to identify the skills that are in short supply so that training resources can be targeted on removing bottlenecks and providing the skills that are most likely to lead to employment. We propose to encourage public-private co-operation in training schemes, which would involve formulating methods to encourage high investment in training by private employers and ensuring that public bodies contract out to private companies that are willing to train employees.

We would bring together research in economic development, education, further education, European funding and the skills of the work force in Northern Ireland to create a clear and extensive training policy. We would study potential and actual inward investment in

Northern Ireland to establish a clearer picture of the forms of training that are needed to continue to secure investment.

As I have mentioned, we believe that the way to sustain economic success is through education, training, improved technology and investment. Through education and training, the Government can assist inward investors by providing the skilled and qualified work force they require. That also applies to other areas of the United Kingdom and, in particular, my area in Barnsley and south Yorkshire. We suffer from similarly high unemployment and we do not, as yet, have the skills necessary to attract inward investment to an area that has been decimated by colliery closures during the past few years. Both employers and Government have a shared responsibility to sustain an active and participatory work force, with adequate working conditions and a reasonable wage.

Productivity is increased by a well-motivated and reasonably secure work force, whereas employees who are riddled with job insecurity, fearful of the future and low in morale will lack commitment and cling cautiously to the status quo and resist change, which is the high road to efficiency. Indeed, a recent study by the Northern Ireland Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux documents a rise in employee anxiety and insecurity in Northern Ireland.

In 1994-95, the citizens advice bureaux in Northern Ireland dealt with almost 14,000 queries about employment. They found that employees were unaware of their rights and that many were not involved in trade unions. Employees claimed that employers were changing conditions suddenly and without warning. Many lived in fear of dismissal and, for that reason, felt obliged to accept deteriorating conditions of work.

In addition, workers in Northern Ireland earn less than their British counterparts—they receive 89 per cent. of the average United Kingdom wage. They have some of the lowest wages in the country, second only to certain areas of the north of England. Some 1 per cent. of employees earn less than £2 an hour, and there are still female manual workers in Northern Ireland who earn less than £1.70 an hour.

As well as providing the best possible work force, the Government have a role in securing adequate working conditions for employees. Low wage levels have been found to be counter-productive, as low earnings reduce employees' spending power, which has implications for the housing market and for the consumer confidence that is essential to building an economic recovery.

Mr. Gary Streeter (Plymouth, Sutton): What will Labour do about low wages?

Mr. Illsley: Low wages and poor conditions can lead to higher employee turnover and more absenteeism. That has been a particular problem in the clothing industry in Northern Ireland. Employers who have constantly to recruit and retrain incur additional costs. Indeed, a report published this week draws attention to the fact that employee turnover in industry is leading many employers to employ older employees.

Labour is committed to a minimum wage and will set up a low pay commission to set a rate that will not damage employment, prices or wage structures. Perhaps that answers the point that the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mr. Streeter) made from a sedentary position a moment ago. I shall repeat it for him. Labour is committed to a minimum wage. We believe that people are entitled to fair wage. Paid work, at a fair wage, is the most effective way in which to tackle poverty. By that means, people will be lifted out of benefit dependency and their dignity will be restored. Pay differences between men and women will be reduced. The differences remain noticeable in Northern Ireland in every area of work. For example, a man in clerical work earns an average of £225 a week; his female counterpart earns only £199. Workers will be better motivated and, therefore, more productive. Staff turnover will be lower, thus reducing employers' recruitment and training costs. Public resources will be freed from subsidising those on low pay and be available for other purposes, such as improving health and education and creating work for the unemployed.

Labour will sign the social chapter. Northern Ireland will never be competitive on the back of a deregulated labour market with low wages and poor conditions. Those factors will not attract sustained long-term investment in Northern Ireland.

Mr. James Cran (Beverley): Keep a straight face.

Mr. Illsley: I have a perfectly straight face when I say that Labour will sign the social chapter.

It is clear that someone will always do the job for less; there will always be an employer who wants to pay less. In China, there are 1 billion people who will work for a few pence an hour. The way to achieve real competitiveness is not to cut costs by cutting pay, but by doing the job better than anyone else and concentrating on quality. If that is to be achieved, business will need a well-qualified, skilled and trained work force. That is what Labour will work to provide.

The proposals that I have outlined are part of Labour's aim of abolishing youth unemployment in Northern Ireland, which still remains a problem. We know that one in four of the registered unemployed in Northern Ireland is under 25 years of age. Labour is considering specific proposals to tackle youth unemployment, including the development of an environmental task force. We are considering lifting the 16-hour rule, which prevents young people from claiming benefit—if they are studying for more than 16 hours a week to improve their skills.

My attention was recently drawn to the problems faced by young people who are trying to improve their skills by studying at local colleges, but who are being targeted by the Department for Eduction and Employment, which is threatening to withdraw benefits unless they discontinue their courses. I have sought to raise the matter with the Secretary of State.

Labour will encourage all young people to continue in mainstream education and training. There is a new deal for the under-25s, which involves employers, the voluntary sector, education and the environmental task force, all of which would combine work and help to develop talent. We are examining how our proposals will work with Northern Ireland's existing training schemes, business and industry, recognising the problems of the interface between education and training systems and the world of work.

Achieving increased competitiveness and growth through investment, innovation and skills is economically necessary and socially responsible. Growth itself,

[Mr. Illsley]

however, does not lead to the creation of jobs at a rate that will seriously tackle Northern Ireland's acute unemployment problem, especially long-term unemployment. Although Northern Ireland's level of unemployment is at its lowest for some years, it is worrying that the number of those who suffer long-term unemployment is still quite high. As I have said, 40 per cent. of those in that position are under 25 years of age.

Long-term unemployment remains much higher in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the United Kingdom. It is also higher than the levels that prevail in the rest of Europe. About half of Northern Ireland's unemployed have been out of a job for longer than three years. The comparable figure for the rest of the United Kingdom is about a third. About 53,000 people are unemployed in Northern Ireland.

The United Kingdom opted out of the social chapter in 1992, at Maastricht. The Government claimed that the social chapter would ruin economic competitiveness and destroy jobs. It appears that that view is not backed by industry as a whole. The chair of Northern Foods, Christopher Haskins, has said that

"the aspirations of the European Union's Social Chapter hold no fears for any responsible British company and the government should sign it."

Increasingly, companies such as Coats Viyella and United Biscuits are implementing the terms of the social chapter voluntarily.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Michael Ancram): I have listened to the hon. Gentleman with great care and attention. He appears to have embarked on quoting distinguished industrialists and manufacturers. As we are debating the economy of Northern Ireland, will he quote a Northern Ireland industrialist who supports the social chapter?

Mr. Illsley: I cannot produce the quotation that the Minister desires. I am sure, however, that, as with industrialists in the rest of the United Kingdom, there will be those in Northern Ireland, business men and industrialists, who support such a view of the social chapter.

Labour believes that we have nothing to fear for work, and everything to gain for workers, in the social chapter. In the past, we have taken our lead on the improvement of conditions for working people from Europe. In 1981, we accepted the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations. European directives gave us the following additional safeguards at work: protecting the terms and conditions of workers when businesses change hands, equal retirement ages for men and women, the extension of sex discrimination legislation to cover enterprises that employ fewer than six people, equalising the upper age limit for redundancy for men and women, and the provision of 14 weeks' statutory maternity leave for women.

Those provisions, and those in the social chapter, are not inhibitors of productivity. On the contrary, productivity is increased by a well-motivated and reasonably secure work force. Employees who are riddled with job insecurity, fear of the future and low morale will lack commitment. A lack of commitment to employment standards brings with it the risk of turning Britain into the sweatshop of Europe.

The ACE programme—Action for Community Employment—was a desperately needed project that has been extremely successful. It gives the long-term unemployed up to a year's training in projects that will benefit the community. The scheme has become a unique part of local community infrastructure. It has served to support some of the most vulnerable people in society, such as the elderly, pre-school children and the unemployed, and about 40 per cent. of participants have gone on to full-time employment or further education. That percentage compares well with what has been achieved by training and enterprise councils by means of training-for-work programmes.

Last year, in the light of ACE's success, the Government chose to reduce their funding of the project by about 25 per cent. As a result of the way in which cuts were administered, many groups faced a 40 per cent. reduction in funding and having to reduce the amount of vital work that they do.

There was an extensive response from all the groups involved in the ACE programme, as well as from hon. Members representing Northern Ireland constituencies. All opposed the 25 per cent. cut. Most were not warned or consulted. As a result of the protest, £2 million-worth of transitional help has been identified by the Government. We have not been told, however, where that money has come from. In any event, it will not go far enough when set against the ACE scheme. Many full-time employees who are funded through the scheme will still be made redundant after cuts have been implemented.

The Government claim that the cuts are the result of a rapidly changing economic situation. They say that the community work programme will take the place of lost training provisions. They know, however, that the CWP is barely up and running. Far fewer people are being trained under it than was planned. The ACE cuts are economically and socially short sighted.

I give the example of Dungannon, which takes fifth place in the list of unemployment black spots in Northern Ireland. Of the job vacancies in Northern Ireland at present, only 3 per cent. are in the Dungannon area, yet the Dungannon development association alone is losing 40 to 50 jobs as a result of cuts to the ACE programme.

The pilot scheme of community work was launched in May 1995. The aim behind it is to target the long-term unemployed and provide them with meaningful paid work. The scheme, which is targeted in Fermanagh, Strabane and west Belfast, is designed to assist 1,000 people. I understand that, as yet, only 250 of the 1,000 places have been filled.

I shall deal now with two issues that I mentioned earlier—the problems of Northern Ireland's beef industry and electricity prices. As has been well documented, electricity prices in Northern Ireland are still some 20 per cent. higher than the average in Great Britain, and that is affecting the Northern Ireland economy. It is obvious that those who are considering inward investment will look closely at electricity prices when comparing the advantages of relocation in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the UK. Many food processing concerns that are already in Northern Ireland have profit margins of about 2 to 3 per cent., which will be affected by any large increase in electricity prices.

There have been a number of reports on Northern Ireland electricity prices. Perhaps the best known is that of the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs,

which drew attention to the problems caused by privatisation. The basis of those problems is the awarding of long-term contracts to the generators that require Northern Ireland Electricity to take all the electricity produced by those generators. Some 60 per cent. of final electricity charges in Northern Ireland results from payments to the generators; the remaining 40 per cent. relates to transmission and other costs, and produces substantial profits for Northern Ireland Electricity. I urge the Government to look closely both at power purchase agreements and at NIE's profitability.

The regulator of NIE, Douglas McIldoon, has issued a consultation document in which he makes suggestions and asks for ideas about how the problem might be addressed. It is clear, however, that the only way in which to address it is to examine the power purchase agreements—the contracts with the generators, some of which will last well into the next century. The lack of regulation of those contracts, and the lack of any requirement for the generators to pass efficiency gains to the transmission companies, have caused the high electricity prices. I hope that, as a result of the regulator's consultation document, the contracts can be referred to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission, or can be renegotiated.

Agriculture is one of the largest sectors of the Northern Ireland economy, if not the largest, and within that sector the beef industry is extremely important. A quick glance at some statistics shows just how important it is. The beef export trade is worth up to £500 million a year, and about 80 per cent. of beef from Northern Ireland is exported, much of it to Europe. More than 16,000 farms in Northern Ireland rely to some extent on cattle for the beef industry, and as many as 10,000 have herds of 10 or more. There are more than 3,000 jobs in beef processing in the Province.

Despite all that, Northern Ireland has a very low incidence of bovine spongiform encephalopathy: about 1 per cent. of the incidence in the United Kingdom. The European ban on beef products, however, has had a devastating effect on the Northern Ireland economy. Because of the importance of agriculture to the economy, that effect has been far more marked in the small area of the Province than in the rest of the United Kingdom. As I have said, many Northern Ireland companies sell directly to Europe. There has also been a knock-on effect in the meat processing industry, in which jobs have been threatened. Those, too, are skilled jobs.

The Labour party believes that the controls now in place in relation to specified offals are such that the European ban on British beef should be lifted. We urge the Government to redouble their efforts in the European Council to achieve the lifting of that ban. We cannot agree, however, that Northern Ireland should be treated as an entity separate from the United Kingdom in relation to beef products.

I congratulate the Ulster Unionists on their choice of subject. It has allowed us to highlight the possibilities and opportunities that are available to Northern Ireland, particularly if the forthcoming elections and negotiations are successful.

5.14 pm

Mr. Andrew Hunter (Basingstoke): My response to the greater part of the thesis propounded by the hon. Member for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley) is that he must not be surprised if Conservative Members shudder with horror at the realisation that Labour economic policy would be as disastrous for the Province as it would be for the rest of the United Kingdom. The virtues that the hon. Gentleman sought to extol would have quite the opposite effect. We would witness job losses, increased costs for businesses, the stifling of economic growth through regulation and lower productivity and profitability; and, following the introduction of the social chapter—which would be wholly disadvantageous—we would discover that it was neither wanted nor needed.

Originally, Madam Deputy Speaker, I had no intention of trying to catch your eye. I believed that it would be best to leave Northern Ireland Members to speak in the debate. There is a little time to go, however, and I welcome this opportunity to make one or two selective observations. I believe that any accurate overview of the general state of the Northern Ireland economy must, on the whole, present an encouraging and satisfactory picture. The essential issue—the essential good news—is measured in the simple statistic that the Province enjoys greater economic growth than the rest of the United Kingdom. Growth last year amounted to some 3.5 per cent., compared with only 2.6 per cent. on the mainland.

I note, however, that the report that forms the basis of today's debate includes a word of caution. The Northern Ireland Economic Council recognises that there is less slack in the local economy than in the national economy, and warns that a significant relaxation of fiscal or monetary policy could have undesirable effects. It postulates that firms might simply come up against shortages—especially in the short term—which could feed through into inflation. Obviously, that would not be in the interests of Northern Ireland. I wonder whether the Government accept the council's thesis, and whether they acknowledge that a significant relaxation of fiscal or monetary policy could have adverse impacts. If so, I hope that that potential danger will remain firmly in their sights.

A number of hon. Members have referred to the relevance, and the supreme importance, of a permanent ceasefire to economic prospects in Northern Ireland. That is self-evident, and I shall add little to what has already been said. It is obvious that Northern Ireland's economy would receive an immediate and permanent boost if there were a permanent ceasefire—a point that Sir George Quigley makes in his report:

> "The economy was beginning to reap significant benefits from the prospect of a permanent and durable peace and it is important for future economic growth that no effort is spared in the search for a solution which will consolidate and enhance the gains of the past seventeen months".

Sir George was writing in February, shortly before the resumption of violence. It is equally clear that inward investment and business confidence were dealt a severe blow by that resumption of violence.

There was a more direct implication. The paramilitary ceasefires had enabled the Government to plan for a reduction of nearly £300 million in expenditure on law and order in the years leading up to 1999. Given the uncertainty of the security position, that poses questions about the organising of priorities.

Employment was the subject of the first inquiry and report of the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs. During their deliberations, its members became

[Mr. Andrew Hunter]

aware of the complexity and depth of the problems and that there are no simple, short-term solutions. During the Committee's work, I postulated a heresy: the argument that there might be mileage in considering turning the Northern Ireland economy into a tax haven to promote greater economic growth than in the rest of the United Kingdom. My arguments were not accepted. It was suggested that they were too inherently inflationary, but there is a point to make that lightening, wherever possible, the burden of direct and indirect taxation on businesses in the Province should be an objective.

The unemployment statistics are encouraging. As we have heard, unemployment in Northern Ireland is at its lowest level since May 1981 and has fallen in nine of the past 12 months. It is pleasing to note that short-term unemployment in Northern Ireland is rapidly approaching the national average. There is less reason for satisfaction with regard to long-term unemployment, which is clearly a significant problem and, I fear, will continue to exist, it seems, for some time. It must remain firmly in the Government's sight that long-term unemployment problems should receive all possible attention.

The Government rightly draw attention to the fact that, since September 1994, there have been 17 new cases of inward investment. Those are worth some £360 million and have the potential to create, over a short period, some 5,000 new jobs. I wonder, however, whether the various projects that are being established can be attributed to the investment conference in Belfast, which was held, if I recall correctly, in February last year—perhaps it was at the end of the previous year—and to the similar conference in the United States of America in March last year. Are those initiatives resulting in a return on investment and in an increase in inward investment in Northern Ireland?

I note with interest the favourable increase in exports from the Province—some 25 per cent. from 1991 to 1994. That, one presumes, is an accurate reflection of, among other things, Northern Ireland businesses' increasing competitiveness. Do the Government have a view on the sustainability of that level of increase? If it can be sustained, it is encouraging news.

On another more general point—the concept of targeting social needs—the Government have rightly made a priority of seeking to tackle disadvantage and of promoting equality of opportunity and treatment for everyone in Northern Ireland. The social needs programme is targeting resources on regions and individuals who are deemed to be in most need. I hope that it will result in a reduction in social and economic differences.

When he replies to the debate, will my right hon. Friend the Minister find an opportunity to make an assessment of the effectiveness of the three major schemes of which I am aware: Making Belfast Work, the Londonderry initiative and the rural development programme? Does he believe that sufficient and acceptable progress is being made in those initiatives?

With regard to the report, I shall be ultra-selective and, if I may, focus attention on paragraphs 2.19 to 2.24 on pages 15 to 18, which deal with public expenditure. Paragraph 2.19 caught my attention in particular. It states:

"The control of public spending is crucial to the Government's ability to meet public finance objectives and allow room for tax reductions."

I received that favourably. It continues:

"From Northern Ireland's viewpoint the Chancellor's decision on the future path of public spending is crucial. This reflects the fact that public expenditure is much more important for Northern Ireland than the UK".

The remainder of the paragraph, however, contains an alarming statement. We are reminded:

"In public spending matters, however, the reality of expenditure outturns can sometimes differ from the rhetoric. For example, the planned 1.3 per cent real cut for the Control Total . . . spending in 1994-95 turned into a 1.4 per cent rise in real spending."

It is alarming and disturbing that what was intended to be a real terms reduction in public expenditure should result in a real terms increase. Has that point caught in particular the attention of my right hon. Friend the Minister? What measures does he believe can be taken to ensure that, in future, expenditure is more in line with Government planning?

Paragraph 2.20 on page 16 illustrates a dilemma facing the Government. It states:

"The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has identified three public expenditure priorities—'defeating terrorism, strengthening the NI economy and targeting social need'".

The paragraph continues:

"Since the ceasefires in late 1994 these priorities have been reordered".

Strengthening the Northern Ireland economy became the first priority, targeting social need the second and providing

"whatever level of resources is necessary for the preservation of law and order in Northern Ireland"

became the third. With the current uncertainty, where do we stand now in relation to Government priorities? With violence resumed on the mainland, what priorities can the Government select when the level of resources that may need to be devoted to security matters is unknown? Clearly, such circumstances make tight Government planning of economic matters difficult.

Paragraph 2.21 refers to the so-called peace dividend and contains the attractive and appealing speculation that the value of the annual dividend

"under conditions of peace and political stability varied between a maximum estimate of £601m and 12,277 positions to a minimum of £427m and 8,168 positions".

Presumably, such reasoning must now be put into abeyance. At present, we simply cannot speak or plan in terms of an effective peace dividend.

The following paragraph makes the vital and central point on the need to deliver public services in an efficient and effective manner:

"the reallocation of these funds should not deflect attention from the need to deliver public services in an efficient and effective manner."

It continues by focusing attention on the Department of Health and Social Services draft regional plan. Will my right hon. Friend give reassurances that the Government bear in mind the need for public funds to be spent in the most and efficient and effective manner possible, not least in the vital sector of health and social services spending?

My last substantive, point on paragraph 2.24, is that we are again faced with the dilemma of setting public expenditure priorities in the present uncertainty about security. Perhaps in his reply the Minister will address that issue because the fundamental problem facing the Government is that when they do not know what

resources need to be allocated to security matters, it is difficult for them to plan public expenditure. Any overview of the Province's economy is favourable and encouraging, and it is good that economic recovery and growth are advancing. The report shows that we can have confidence in the Government's handling of the situation.

5.30 pm

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Port Glasgow): I compliment the members of the Ulster Unionist party for choosing this subject for debate. I say to the hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mr. Hunter) that I would be happy to argue the case for the social chapter and a minimum wage and for a Scottish Parliament and a tartan tax. However, that would take me outwith the framework of the debate. In my brief speech I wish to put several questions to the Minister about the Northern Ireland fishing industry, the Action for Community Employment—or ACE—programme, the community work programme and sea ferry and air services between Northern Ireland and Scotland.

The Northern Ireland fishing industry employs more than 2,000 people and is important to small fishing communities, as is the case in and around the Firth of Clyde. In 1994, fish landings were worth £18 million. My questions are prompted by paragraph 5.42 on page 64 of the document called "Northern Ireland Expenditure Plans and Priorities". The paragraph refers to the European Union's multi-action guidance programme, which states that by the end of this year the United Kingdom's fishing fleet will have to be reduced by about 19 per cent. The paragraph states:

"A decommissioning scheme was introduced in 1993-94 and in 1995-96 a further 13 Northern Ireland applications were successful under the scheme at a cost of £1.5 million. This brings the total of successful applications in Northern Ireland to 55 at a total cost of £4.5 million and equates to a 20 per cent. reduction in the gross registered tonnage of the Northern Ireland fleet. The position is monitored so that action can be taken if effort by the remaining vessels should increase."

As the son of a fisherman and a fishergirl or, as she would have been known in those days a fish house lass, throughout my adult life I have argued that there are too many fishermen pursuing too few fish around our coasts. The document seems to show that the Northern Ireland fishing fleet has met the obligation that was placed upon the United Kingdom by the European Union to reduce the gross registered tonnage, because it has reduced its fleet by 20 per cent. and the requirement is 19 per cent. Will the Government assist with modernising that reduced fleet?

In Northern Ireland, as in the west of Scotland from Ullapool to Girvan and beyond, there is an aging fleet. That does not make sense for the safety of fishermen or for making life less difficult for the men who pursue the most hazardous occupation in the United Kingdom. How many vessels have been ordered by the owners of vessels in Northern Ireland? How many conversions to increase engine capacity have been encouraged by the Northern Ireland Office for EU funding? Does the Northern Ireland fleet, like those of the Western Isles and the Clyde Fishermen's Association, suffer because up to now the United Kingdom has failed to meet the requirements of the multi-action guidance programme?

Does the Minister agree that there should be grants to replace aging vessels that may become less and less efficient and perhaps more and more hazardous in heavy weather? I readily acknowledge that fishing power must be constrained by the need to maintain healthy stocks. If any fishermen are to be banned, they should be the Spanish. I hope that the Minister will forgive my ethnocentricity. *[Interruption.]* A common fisheries policy should be based upon regional preferences and management because in fragile fishing communities there are few options for other forms of employment. That holds just as strongly for Northern Ireland and, indeed, for some of the smaller fishing communities south of the border, as it does for Scotland.

Bearing in mind the need to constrain fishing effort to the total allowable catches and the need to maintain viable stocks, a reduced fleet must be modern. I should welcome the Minister's response to the concerns that I have expressed—dare I say it—on behalf of the fishermen of Northern Ireland and Scotland. Fishing is important because, as I have said, more than 2,000 people in Northern Ireland are directly employed in it. Table 5.19 of the Government's report is entitled "Fisheries sector performance indicators". What is the employment ratio for the catching sector of the Northern Ireland fishing industry?

I shall now deal with ACE and the community work programme. The last time that I was in Northern Ireland, some representatives of voluntary organisations, one of whom was Quintin Oliver, who I think is the chief executive of the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, expressed concern about the decision savagely to reduce the ACE programme. My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley) said that the reduction was about 25 per cent. Representatives from community and voluntary organisations expressed deep anger and serious concern about this ill-judged decision.

In paragraph 5.16 of the Northern Ireland Economic Council's report, the authors state:

"Within the overall Industry, Trade and Employment (ITE) programme an important announcement was the decision by the Training and Employment Agency (T&EA) to cut the Action for Community Employment (ACE) budget by 25 per cent., thereby reducing the number of placements by 1,800."

The authors go on to state that the programme

"was attractive for those receiving no or relatively low benefit and has attracted high levels of part-time jobs".

The hon. Member for Basingstoke said that he was highly selective in his remarks about such documents. I should point out that this document goes on to state:

"It is, of course, precisely in this area where much new job growth has taken place."

However, the authors then comment:

"As yet, with the Community Work Programme not fully operational there do not appear to be any alternatives in place to accommodate 'discouraged workers' most affected by the scheme."

I should like to ask the Minister what will happen to the community work programme—which, two months ago, a ministerial colleague of his suggested would, by and large, take the place of much of the ACE programme.

Paragraph 6.159 of "Northern Ireland Expenditure Plans and Priorities" states that the community work programme

"was introduced in April 1995 on a two year pilot basis and will provide up to 1,000 places. Its aim is to assist local communities to break the cycle of long-term unemployment in their areas by assessing and developing the skills of long-term unemployed adults as a resource to effect local improvements."

[Dr. Norman A. Godman]

The three areas of Fermanagh, Strabane and west Belfast are then mentioned.

What is to happen to that community work programme? Has the Northern Ireland Office now had a chance to assess the implications of the 25 per cent. cut in the ACE programme? Will that lead to job losses? Will those job losses be more than recompensed by the jobs created by the community work programme? Those are important questions for people living in badly deprived areas in many communities in Northern Ireland. Those people—particularly those associated with voluntary community organisations—have a right to know the answers to those questions.

At the weekend there was mention in the Scottish press of a ferry service between Northern Ireland and Scotland. Some have argued that such a service between Ballycastle and Campbeltown could do much to revive the economy of the Mull of Kintyre, which has recently suffered severely from job losses. If such a service were to link Ballycastle, Campbeltown and, for example, Wemyss bay, rather than Greenock, and if it were to be extended to Moville in county Donegal, would that allow those concerned to obtain more easily funding from the European Union, as it would involve ferry links between two countries, as well as Northern Ireland and Scotland in the United Kingdom?

The best case might be for the creation by Caledonian MacBrayne, for example, of a service between Ballycastle and Campeltown in the first instance, and we could then see how that service develops, particularly in the tourist season.

I should like, finally, to ask a question about air services between Northern Ireland and Scotland, as it has been brought to my attention that there has been a reduction in such services. I find that the service between Glasgow airport—that superb airport, which is just a few minutes from my constituency—and Belfast, for example, is very useful. I should be most pleased if the Minister were able to refute the complaint that those services have been reduced. It would be a shame if such a reduction has taken place because of its effect on the development of air services and sea ferries.

If the Minister cannot answer all my questions in his reply—especially those on the multi-action guidance programme—I shall be happy to await a letter from him.

5.44 pm

Mr. Harry Barnes (North–East Derbyshire): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Port Glasgow (Dr. Godman), who takes a serious interest in Northern Ireland affairs. Like me, he is an associate member of the British-Irish interparliamentary body—a body that we wish Ulster Unionists would pay attention to because it is able to discuss such matters as the economic development of the island of Ireland, and the very important role played by the Northern Ireland economy.

I cannot follow my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Port Glasgow on subjects related to fishing or to ferry services, partly because the constituency that I represent is entirely land-locked, and I tend not to have any knowledge on those topics.

I was interested in the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Port Glasgow raised about the cuts in the Action for Community Employment programme in Northern Ireland. In fact, the sections of the report that he quoted to us were the ones that I had marked in the report. I therefore do not need to develop those points, except to say that paragraph 5.16 goes on to state:

"The withdrawal of ACE is likely to cause funding difficulties for a number of voluntary and community organisations."

There is a plethora of voluntary and community organisations in Northern Ireland. The possibility of voluntary organisations being established in Northern Ireland is considerably aided because politics in Northern Ireland have their own peculiarities and because political parties there are not part of government. Many of those organisations operate on a cross-community basis, and little could be more important than developing that type of work and building such links and connections. Therefore, cuts in the ACE programme that affect those programmes is a very serious matter, and would be additional to equivalent action taken in Britain.

Mr. William Ross: Does the hon. Gentleman care to consider my thesis that one of the reasons why there are so many of those bodies is the powerlessness of local government? There are so many things that local government could and should be doing, but which it is not doing.

Mr. Barnes: It is certainly an encouragement to voluntary organisations when local government is not active or achieving what it should be achieving, or when it is prevented from operating in the manner it is in Northern Ireland. I am a great advocate of establishing the equivalent of parish councils in urban areas—what are called neighbourhood councils. I think that such councils should act as pressure groups on behalf of their communities. Like voluntary organisations, they should get together and enact plans in their areas to pressurise those with administrative responsibility in wider local government, in the Province and in Westminster.

I thought that the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley) was excellent. Anyone from Northern Ireland who listens to his contribution—as they will do—will be very impressed with the relevance of Labour's policies to Northern Ireland in such matters as training, education, jobs, provision for small business, the minimum wage, the social chapter, electricity prices in Northern Ireland, beef, specific provisions on Northern Ireland and Labour's promise on the Northern Ireland skills audit. All these are of tremendous relevance to the people of Northern Ireland.

The great pity is that, however much attention is paid in Northern Ireland to my Front-Bench colleague's views, Labour does not run candidates in Northern Ireland so the people of Northern Ireland cannot take up his valuable ideas. Labour organisation in Northern Ireland, tying in with our policies, needs to be taken on board to make those views a reality. Unless other political parties in Northern Ireland are willing to pick up some of our ideas, offer them to the electorate and do so in a way that cuts across community divisions, Labour is in a very good position to do it. I am afraid that that is a bit of a back-handed compliment to my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, Central but it is sincere.

It is great that we are debating the Northern Ireland economy, which is important not only in general terms but in developing the peace process. An improved economy and growing prosperity are good in themselves but can also be very important in tackling the problems of violence and intimidation.

Michael Barratt-Brown wrote an excellent pamphlet on the tragedy in Yugoslavia. It points out that some of the major problems that caused its conflict arose because economic factors divided the people. On a smaller scale, Northern Ireland has been behind Britain in terms of economics—for example, it has had higher unemployment rates. This has meant that it has been possible for extremists to develop sectarian policies and get paramilitary support—they find it easier to do so in adverse economic circumstances. We should all be very aware of the links between economics, divisions and violence.

There is a problem in talking about growth in Northern Ireland. There is a sense in which growth and improved prosperity undermine violence, but an agreement to end violence would allow economic growth to develop. Economic growth and the end of violence are not in separate compartments. We cannot say that the start of one will lead to the other—they are interlinked.

We have opportunities to debate Northern Ireland economic matters but we sometimes fail to make full use of them. Twice a year we have appropriation debates. I have always said that they are the nearest thing to Budget debates for Northern Ireland. We should take care to develop them into serious discussions such as that which we are having today. It is often the case—again, this might be natural given the position of local government in Northern Ireland—that Northern Ireland Members attend appropriation debates and use them as opportunities to stress constituency problems and their case loads because no other avenues are available to them. Sometimes, however, it would be good to change that and have a debate like today's so that we can determine the different political stances.

I congratulate the Ulster Unionist party on providing this opportunity to discuss the Northern Ireland Economic Council's report and on producing its own document entitled "Economic Prosperity for All". It is dated May 1996 so I presume that it is linked with this debate. I am not saying that I go along with all the ideas expressed in it, but it is important that the party has produced it. I would encourage other political parties in Northern Ireland to develop their own approaches and strategies.

The leader of the Social and Democratic Labour party said that there were common interests between his party and what the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir J. Molyneaux) said, but if we look back to the previous election, it is clear that there were some differences in the two parties' manifestos. In a sense, the SDLP manifesto contains economic values that I would warm to more readily than I could warm to the contents of the other manifestos. It said things such as:

"We believe that efficient and effective public services are essential to our well-being and development as a community",

and that it is concerned that

"moves from direct to indirect taxation are at the expense of those on lower incomes".

It states that a shift to a more general indirect taxation

"should not proceed unless accompanied by relevant compensation measures for people in lower income groups".

It also mentions reform of the common agricultural policy and the refocusing of investment strategies and appeals for inward investment. That is also part of the UUP's position, although it is given a different flavour.

Given the indications of agreement from the leader of the SDLP, I wonder whether what we had in 1992 was a traditional Social Democratic and Labour party agenda and that what is now developing is new Social Democratic and Labour party provisions which, as long as they are in line with what was said by members of our Front Bench, might be entirely acceptable but might not have developed as clearly in some areas as they had in the past.

One problem with the economic structure of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom is that Northern Ireland has only about 3 per cent. of the UK population and is therefore not seen as being a major influence in determining policy. The Northern Ireland Office often seems to run up against the general stance adopted by the Conservative party and is sometimes obliged to pick up some nonsense such as the privatisation of electricity, the hands-off state and agency provisions, which operate elsewhere. It is felt that such agendas can be plonked on Northern Ireland, but the Government should pay attention to the economic and social circumstances of Northern Ireland. Even if the Government do not believe that policies of a more collective nature are appropriate for Britain, they should consider their relevance to Northern Ireland.

As the council's report shows, dependence on benefits is considerably greater in Northern Ireland than in Britain, so cuts in benefits have a disproportionately greater effect in Northern Ireland unless they are made good by improved job opportunities. In addition, because of the poverty trap, disincentives to take work will be even greater in Northern Ireland than in Britain. The minimum wage, which was stressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, Central, is therefore of great relevance to Northern Ireland. Employment opportunities would lead not to the same degree of poverty trap provision, but would allow improved earnings to enter the family budget.

It has been pointed out that Northern Ireland's housing market has experienced some buoyancy. Growth in the Northern Ireland economy might therefore be hindered in ways that it is not elsewhere. Economic growth and development, especially the sort in which I believe, has often been associated with house building. The emergence from the problems of the 1930s, at the end of the depression before the war started, was very much associated with council house building. All sorts of benefits accrue as a result of house building because people in new houses want new furniture, new curtains and new wallpaper, which gives a Keynesian-type boost to the economy. There might be less scope for that to occur in Northern Ireland due to the slightly more buoyant housing market of recent years and some of the roles played by the Housing Executive, although the Government have been trying to interfere with it.

Economic performance was relatively good in Northern Ireland in 1995. As in housing, that means that there is less slack to pull in. The Government should consider that seriously when they work out which policies they feel are relevant to Northern Ireland. We should examine reports of the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs and consider the work of the British-Irish interparliamentary body, which often discusses economic relationships in the European Union.

[Mr. Barnes]

Such matters are the stuff of politics. Hon. Members rush into the Chamber to discuss Northern Ireland concerns about bombs, the constitution and high politics, but, as is obvious from today's debate, they do not do that for the bread-and-butter concerns of the people of Northern Ireland. Yet the Northern Ireland people want us to address exactly those matters. Indeed, in doing so, we sometimes discover different combinations of alliances. Perhaps we should have more solid argument and some good ding-dongs in the House about Northern Ireland's economic direction among all its politicians rather than ding-dongs about constitutional developments and community divisions. That is the direction that the House needs to take.

The Northern Ireland Economic Council's report contains much of considerable interest. It certainly does not just peddle Government prejudices for certain policies. It was unfortunate that the hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mr. Hunter), who has now left the Chamber, suggested that there should be cut after cut to facilitate income tax reductions. That might be a big debate affecting British politics, but in Northern Ireland, it could have a serious effect on the possibilities of achieving improvement and growth.

The report makes a number of suggestions on page 68. It calls for greater partnership between the public and private sectors, which is certainly the language of new Labour, and should therefore be carefully considered. It also says that there is

"the need to ensure that economic opportunities provided by the paramilitary ceasefires are built upon".

At the moment, the ending of the paramilitary ceasefires is directed more towards London than Northern Ireland. In the near future, there might be a restoration of a ceasefire and opportunities might begin to flow from it. I hope that when that occurs, we do not consider it a great chance to take various financial resources away from Northern Ireland. Such a ceasefire should be an opportunity to encourage developments in Northern Ireland and take action on an economic and social front that will take the ground away from the paramilitaries. I have always been insistent that we should do that.

I greatly support the bipartisan policy in Northern Ireland which allows debates such as these. But I differed from the line taken by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, Central, the Front-Bench spokesman, on the prevention of terrorism Act because I thought that precisely such a line could give ground to the paramilitaries that they could use and argue to recruit people. We need to stop the recruitment of paramilitaries, and nothing would stop it more effectively than people having more money in their pockets, being able to travel, mix with people, build a life for the future and have security. We should be working together to establish the exact formula by which such economic change can be achieved, regardless of how difficult ding-dong debates on economic ideas may be.

6.5 pm

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): A number of hon. Members have begun their speeches by expressing thanks to members of the Ulster Unionist party for tabling the motion on this half Supply day that falls to us each year. I express my thanks to the hon. Member for Greenock and Port Glasgow (Dr. Godman) for covering the fishing industry. It certainly saves me any trouble in that direction. He referred to some very important issues to which I hope we shall return before we are very much older. The industry is of concern to many people in Northern Ireland as well as far further afield. The number of fish in the sea, what harvests we can reap, and the number of people who can make a living from the industry are problems that will not be easily resolved or simply go away.

I express my thanks to the hon. Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume), who has left the Chamber, for raising the ceasefire, or the possible re-ceasefire of the IRA. I must confess that anyone who watched Jonathan Dimbleby interview one of Sinn Fein-IRA's leading members yesterday will not have been terribly encouraged by the responses that Mr. Dimbleby received. One of my friends said that they wished that the pair were put on again, which was an interesting departure from the point of view one normally hears whenever such spokesmen appear on our screens.

I say to those who will be speaking to the hon. Member for Foyle that I hope that he and the IRA-Sinn Fein understand that the sort of ceasefire that we had is not good enough to attract anyone. It must go far beyond that; there must be a real ceasefire and a real cessation of violence against those who oppose the gunman in any shape or form. We have seen what has happened over the past 20 months or more and it is just not acceptable that such behaviour continued—even after a ceasefire was announced. It must be for real.

I should like to turn to the Northern Ireland meat industry, which is of course bound up in the destiny of the United Kingdom beef industry at the moment. As has already been pointed out, the situation is comparatively more serious in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the United Kingdom because Northern Ireland exports a much greater proportion of its beef production than England or Wales. I shall leave Scotland out of this discussion for the moment—it also exports a large amount of beef and it has its own peculiar problems.

I shall illustrate the importance of the beef industry to Northern Ireland by pointing out that the United Kingdom exported some 246,000 tonnes of beef in 1994. It is difficult to quantify the number of cattle that were exported because some of it was on the bone and some was boned beef. Of that 246,000 tonnes, 57,400 tonnes came from Northern Ireland alone—that is approximately 28 per cent. of the United Kingdom's beef exports. That puts the importance of Northern Ireland's beef industry into perspective. When one combines Scotland's beef exports with Northern Ireland's beef exports, one sees that about half the exports come from those two areas of the United Kingdom.

A few days after the beef export ban was imposed, I attended a meeting of farmers at the Balmoral centre in Belfast. A spokesman for the transport organisations informed the meeting that 104 specialised lorries have nothing to do. That is a critical situation: the lorries are important economic assets that are doing nothing and that is costing a lot of money. Jobs will be lost if the lorries sit idle. This is only one tiny facet of the problems of the beef industry with which the Government have to grapple.

The lack of confidence in that sector was exposed by a report of the PA Consulting Group dated 7 May. The report pointed out that investment in the beef industry has reduced by exactly 100 per cent. compared with one year ago. In other words, people have decided not to invest in the beef industry in Northern Ireland. This is a serious situation and there are all sorts of nuances. We shall have ample opportunity to discuss and explore this entire issue in Committee this week and on the Floor of the House.

I recognise that the whole of the United Kingdom's beef industry sinks or swims together, but I contend that with the traceability capacity that we have in Northern Ireland, with the quality assurance that we have in Northern Ireland and with the improving situation in Scotland and elsewhere in the United Kingdom regarding traceability, we can guarantee the beef. We should supply this beef and use it as a crowbar to reopen the overseas market and to break the ban. We could begin this process with the Northern Ireland product.

I understand all the arguments about treating everyone the same, but the situation is not the same everywhere. We could use this key to unlock the door to Europe once more.

There is a problem in relation to bull beef and what we will do about it. We cannot open the door and put those animals out to grass—and everyone knows that. That is part and parcel of the economic difficulty facing the whole farming industry. It is like a row of dominoes—when one is pushed, they all fall. The key is the European market; the key is opening up the world market for our beef. We need to get our population—20 million to 30 million people—to have their Sunday roast again, which would be a great help.

The report of the PA Consulting Group showed that, compared with a year ago, orders are down, output is expected to rise slightly over the next 12 months and investment overall is up by 13 per cent. Given that there was no investment in meat processing, other sectors in Northern Ireland have had an increased level of investment, which is to be welcomed. The figures should be viewed in a positive light in the medium to long term so far as the Northern Ireland economy is concerned. However, there are some worries in the manufacturing sector.

I am sure that over the weekend hon. Members listened, with a fair degree of jealousy, to the possibility of a large investment going to south Wales—we all hoped that it would come to our areas. The hon. Member for Greenock and Port Glasgow is smiling—no doubt he would have been happy to have had that investment in Port Glasgow. Any part of the United Kingdom would be happy to have that sort of investment. We welcome the fact that investment is coming into the United Kingdom, and we hope that similar investments will be made in the future.

We hope that when investors come here they will be encouraged to increase their uptake of local graduates and that they will to do more research and development in the United Kingdom, particularly in Northern Ireland. My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, North (Mr. Walker) agreed with me when I pointed out that electronics firms are employing a large number of graduates—and we want to see more of that. We want our young people to stay at home, and we want to see research and development structures at home. That is how we will get more home-grown firms. They will provide a lot of employment in the future and we need to grab a piece of the action. We have to get our best trained young people to work at home, rather than export them to America and elsewhere.

I refer to factories in my constituency—Benelux, which appears to be experiencing some job losses; and AVX in Coleraine which laid off 78 people last weekend. In relation to AVX, I hope that there will be further reinvestment, that there will be retooling, that it will get back its market share, and that the jobs will be restored. These are areas of high unemployment and we need to keep all the jobs that currently exist.

Interesting figures are starting to emerge about the general unemployment rate in Northern Ireland, in that there is a big difference between the level of male and female unemployment. The female unemployment rate is currently 6 per cent. or less and the male unemployment rate is three times that figure. This is worrying. We would like the male unemployment rate to drop. One firm that is engaged in textiles had to put its factory in Newry rather than Strabane because it could not get workers in Strabane—which has more than 30 per cent. unemployment, so there is something wrong somewhere. Perhaps it is the wrong sort of work; perhaps there are not enough people unemployed as opposed to the high percentage. It is worrying that factories are saying that they cannot get enough workers in areas of high unemployment. There were 800 jobs involved in that case.

If the Government have not done research as to why this is so, it is long overdue. We need to find out why female unemployment is down to a reasonable level when compared with the rest of the United Kingdom—and could become lower with a bit of hard work—and why male unemployment is at an atrociously high level. I hope that the Minister will carefully consider the reasons for that and target the problem of male unemployment, as opposed to that of female unemployment, which is largely resolved.

The Minister will recall that Baroness Denton visited the Coleraine area on Friday 3 May. I accompanied her on visits that I had arranged to three manufacturing firms.

The first firm was a very small, high-precision engineering concern, operating from a farmyard. The second manufactured heavy truck bodies, fitted them into trucks and exported them. Interestingly, we had some Danish visitors with us, and when we went into that works the first truck body that they saw was labelled "Denmark", so the exports had got that far. The Danish visitors were even more pleased to discover that the brochures were printed in their own language—a detail that so many people never seem to think about. The third firm was a very small organisation in one of our enterprise parks in Coleraine, which manufactured a range of medical equipment, now being exported far and wide.

The interesting thing about all those small, healthy organisations was that each was home grown. All were started by local people. One of those people had started the business more than 60 years ago and built up a fairly large organisation by Northern Ireland standards. The other two firms are much more recent, and tiny, and do high-quality work very well.

What more do the Government propose to do to encourage such enterprises? They are home grown. These folks will not uproot and leave at the first chill wind of economic change. There may be a fluctuation in the number of employees if things get really difficult, but they

[Mr. William Ross]

will remain there and will not go away. Those small firms need more encouragement, and more overseas investment, because many of them operate by supplying larger organisations, some of which are created by overseas investment and some of which are home grown.

What positive results have emerged from the visit of our American friends to Belfast and the visit of so many people from Northern Ireland to Washington? It was a great jamboree. We all enjoyed it, but we did not go for the beer; we went for jobs. I should like to think that some good investment had begun to appear as a result. I have not been told of very much yet. It is time that we saw some results.

As has been said, inward investment will not be encouraged by energy prices in Northern Ireland. You will recall, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that Ulster Unionist Members were not at all happy about the way in which Northern Ireland Electricity was privatised. It was sold off with long-term high profits built into the scheme. There is little hope of an early review of that long-term payment system, which will force prices up and up.

The fuel used for generation—oil and so on—is cheaper than it was at the start of the privatisation period, yet the people of Northern Ireland find the cost of electricity still increasing. They are not happy, we are not happy, and the large industrial users, who find that about 80 per cent. of the final cost of electricity consumed is taken up by generation, are very unhappy, to put it mildly.

Those generation costs will increase considerably as a result of the long-term agreements entered into when Northern Ireland Electricity was privatised. I wonder whether the Government support package of about £60 million will solve the problem. Perhaps we should seek a way to revamp those agreements, for conditions have changed so much in even the short time since our electricity was privatised. Whatever money there is must be used to control generating costs. Will the Government give a commitment in that regard?

Several other measures could and should be considered in that regard. We still have the problem of the cost of heavy oil and the VAT charged on it. We still have the problem of the gas pipeline, which is tied to British Gas purchasing the Ballylumford station. I understand that the price of that gas is likely to be roughly double the current price of gas in Great Britain. We also want to know how much of that gas will go for domestic consumption and for consumption by industry other than electricity generation.

The subject is all the more topical because we all woke up this morning to hear on the radio that the gas industry over here was being lambasted right, left and centre for unconscionably high profits, and that massive reductions—I believe up to 20 per cent.—are demanded.

If the gas price charged to people in Great Britain steadily decreases, will the gas price charged to people in Northern Ireland remain at its existing unrealistically, scandalously high level for the generation of electricity? If so, British Gas would add to its profits, not only from the gas, but from the electricity that it produces and sells from that gas. That would not be tenable.

I understand that British Gas is involved in explorations for gas in the Irish sea. If it finds gas there, what will be the price regime in relation to that, and what will the Government do about it? If the cost of electricity and gas for all industrial, commercial and household purposes in Northern Ireland is twice that in Great Britain, not many users of energy or gas will build factories in Northern Ireland. Right hon. and hon. Members who represent constituencies in south and west Scotland may be happy about that, because if those people want to remain close to the island of Ireland, that is where they will build a factory.

We must do something on a large scale and for the longer term about energy generation in Northern Ireland. That must be reflected, not only in this first contract period for gas and electricity prices, but in all succeeding contracts in succeeding years.

The Conservative party is always willing to push competition, and I am all in favour of competition, but we must get away from the present position. We seem to have replaced a public monopoly in energy with private ownership that is concentrated in so few hands that there is no real competition. We still have a managed market, in that the only person who is able to put pressure on companies to force down prices, to make them appear more realistic, is the regulator.

We must go beyond that. We must open up the market if we are to receive the benefits that we expect to flow from privatisation—greater efficiency and lower prices. That includes, in the medium term, moves toward generation in Northern Ireland from our native lignite sources. I know that there are all sorts of connected problems, but the lignite is there—a home-grown source of electricity—and we should push on with it, not hang back.

If we are building a conductor across the north channel to import electricity, we can use it to export electricity. We should be in the happy position where we could import and export electricity from and to the British and the European grid, and eventually from and to the Irish Republic. That should bring down the cost of the spinning reserve in electricity—I put the same arguments in the early 1970s—and, in turn, reduce electricity overheads. If those points had been considered when Northern Ireland Electricity was being sold off, we would not be in such a mess today. I hope that the Government will address them now.

Reference was made to transportation to and from Northern Ireland—the hon. Member for Greenock and Port Glasgow has always been very supportive of Northern Ireland in that regard. I hope not only that there will be an extra link to Campbeltown from Ballycastle but that something will be done about the roads in Scotland. Northern Ireland's economic problems do not begin and end at Larne—some extend far beyond that. I urge the Minister to speak to his right hon. Friend in the Scottish Office about improving those roads. Another problem is the fact that grant aid to ports differs according to whether they are in private or public ownership. I hope that the Minister recognises that anomaly and will ensure that the grants are equalised so that all ports are on a level playing field.

Hon. Members referred briefly to the tourist industry. As the hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady) pointed out, much of the investment has been in luxury hotels and we face real difficulties with the provision of other accommodation. One constituent who lives on the north coast told me that in one afternoon last year she received 70 calls from people seeking accommodation.

However, she had accepted the first caller and her accommodation was full. Heaven only knows where the other people stayed—I suspect that many did not stay in Northern Ireland as accommodation is scarce. We have reached a situation where Northern Ireland has nearly as many tourists as residents. We need a lot of accommodation—particularly medium-quality accommodation which ordinary men and women can afford—and a high-speed link to Scotland and elsewhere.

The speeches of my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir J. Molyneaux) and of the hon. Member for Foyle, the leader of the SDLP, underlined yet again the fact that the people of Northern Ireland can work together for the common economic good. I hope that that belief will be reflected in political and constitutional measures before too many weeks have passed.

6.32 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Michael Ancram): This has been a very useful debate, which was launched in an admirable manner by the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir J. Molyneaux). As the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) pointed out, it is interesting that hon. Members talked, by and large, about the economy and did not drift into an appropriation order debate—although the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) echoed a debate of that sort as he listed the points that he would like answered. Nevertheless, we have had a constructive debate to which I hope to respond positively.

The hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire—who unfortunately has had to leave the Chamber—gave his Front Bench a little grief about whether Labour should organise itself in Northern Ireland. I do not wish to interfere in that argument. However, he surprised me by suddenly heaping praise upon the hon. Member for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley), whose speech took the rest of us by surprise. I think that he was trying to enunciate Labour's new policy for Northern Ireland and, in fairness to him, I shall study his remarks carefully.

The hon. Gentleman referred to issues such as training and education and the like, but he did not offer anything tangible. That may have been a deliberate strategy, because the last time that he spoke in such a debate, he told us what Labour intended to do in office. When I asked him what its policies would cost, he said that that was an unfair question. I then asked what services would be sacrificed in order to pay for them and he said that that question was even more unfair. Therefore, I suspect that he deliberately avoided giving any details today—but one day, the people of Northern Ireland will want to know what part of the Northern Ireland budget will pay for new Labour's policies.

The hon. Gentleman called for the unqualified application of the social chapter in Northern Ireland. I may be wrong, but I thought that—although it intends to get rid of qualified majority voting—new Labour intended to pick and choose what it wanted from the social chapter. However, the truth came out today, when the hon. Gentleman foreshadowed that the Labour party would implement the social chapter in full. I admire the hon. Gentleman for almost managing—but not quite—to keep a straight face. I am reminded of the remark of a Labour Member who said that in the Labour party one must learn to defend the indefensible. I think that the hon. Gentleman did that pretty well tonight.

We have had an instructive and wide-ranging debate. Obviously, I do not agree with all that has been said, but we have identified a number of important points regarding the Northern Ireland economy. Several hon. Members referred to employment and unemployment in Northern Ireland—issues that are central to any economic debate about any part of the United Kingdom. In a perspicacious speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mr. Hunter) made several good points. For example, he pointed to the fact that unemployment in Northern Ireland is now at its lowest level since May 1981.

It is worth registering that unemployment in Northern Ireland has fallen by 20,000 since 1993. It is encouraging to note that some of the biggest falls in unemployment were recorded in areas that were badly affected by violence in the past. For example, in the past year the Belfast, West parliamentary constituency has seen a fall of 14 per cent., which is almost three times the Northern Ireland average. Those figures are particularly relevant in the light of what has been said about the importance of peace to the Northern Ireland economy.

A similar case can be made in terms of employment. The latest available employment figures for December 1995 are 8,550 more than for December 1995 and, encouragingly, they are 6,260 more than for September 1995. The main increase in employment was in the services sector, but employment in manufacturing increased also. Employment in Northern Ireland has risen faster than in the United Kingdom throughout the 1990s. We often identify what is wrong with Northern Ireland, but tonight hon. Members on both sides sounded the trumpet for Northern Ireland. It is right that we should show the world how well Northern Ireland is doing.

Hon. Members referred also to inward investment projects. I have no doubt that the conferences held by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in November 1994 and by President Clinton in Washington in May last year contributed to the momentum for investment. It is important to note that, since September 1994, shortly after the IRA ceasefire, there have been 17 new Industrial Development Board-backed inward investment projects involving £360 million in investment and promoting almost 5,000 new jobs. The hon. Member for East Londonderry inquired about inward investment and about what action had flowed from the conferences. It is worth pointing out that there have been significant successes in that period.

The position with regard to output remains encouraging. Since 1991, Northern Ireland manufacturing output has risen by 15 per cent., which is almost twice the United Kingdom average. My hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke mentioned exports, and I can give him some later and better figures. Since 1991-92, Northern Ireland's exports have risen by 48 per cent., compared with 30 per cent. for the United Kingdom as a whole. That is a welcome sign that Northern Ireland is becoming increasingly competitive and outward looking.

The hon. Members for East Londonderry and for South Down (Mr. McGrady) mentioned the tourist sector. Visitor numbers in 1995 broke all records, with the total number of visitors topping 1.5 million. The number of holiday visitors increased by 67 per cent. to 460,000. Tourism is obviously sensitive to the security situation, but it is encouraging to note that major hotel chains have made two investments worth £26 million since Canary wharf on 9 February. Clearly, the confidence remains to

[Mr. Michael Ancram]

invest, and I urge hon. Members not to mock investments simply because they are large. Any investment in tourism that demonstrates confidence in Northern Ireland at this time should be widely welcomed.

A vast number of points were raised and I shall try to deal with some of them. The hon. Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume) and others, including the hon. Member for East Londonderry, raised the issue of beef and BSE. He spoke eloquently about a serious problem and I agree with much of what he said.

We are all concerned about the effect of the BSE crisis on Northern Ireland, not least because of the importance of the beef industry to the Northern Ireland economy and the number of jobs that depend on it. We see the European Union export ban impacting more severely on Northern Ireland than on Great Britain because of its greater reliance on exports. The Government's priority is to get the ban lifted and to restore confidence in British beef.

As the hon. Member for East Londonderry pointed out, there will be several opportunities to debate the matter over the next few days, so I shall not spend too much time on it this evening. However, I should refer to the fact that the hon. Member for Foyle argued for separate BSE status from the rest of Great Britain because Northern Ireland has a substantially lower incidence of BSE. He also mentioned the unique computer system that enables its movements to be traced.

There is considerable force in the hon. Gentleman's arguments, but to pursue a separate status for Northern Ireland at this time would be counter-productive to the United Kingdom's principal objective of having the unjustified and illegal ban on the entire United Kingdom beef industry removed. I can assure the House that the Government are committed to continuing and renewing our efforts towards that crucial objective. I was grateful to the hon. Member for East Londonderry for accepting that it has to be achieved on an United Kingdom-wide basis.

The hon. Member for Foyle also asked whether Northern Ireland and the border counties could become a duty-free zone for goods from Northern Ireland to the United States. That is an interesting and somewhat novel concept, but it would involve considerable difficulties that I am sure he would wish to consider. Trade agreements for members of the European Union are made by the European Union on behalf of all member states. Single states cannot make arrangements on their own behalf, still less for parts of member states, as the project would suggest. Therefore, I do not believe that legal powers exist to negotiate separate agreements of that kind.

There would be severe practical problems even if the legal issues could be overcome, which in my view would be highly improbable. The European Union is a customs union with free movement of goods within its borders. Therefore, it would be impossible to distinguish between goods originating in Northern Ireland and the border counties and goods moving through those areas, but originating in other parts of the European Union. In other words, the free trade zone could not be policed and goods from elsewhere would be drawn through Northern Ireland and the border counties and could cause great distortions of trade. It is an interesting concept, but in practical terms it would fail on the basis of a number of those tests.

The hon. Member for Belfast, North (Mr. Walker) made an important speech promoting the city of Belfast. During my three years as a Northern Ireland Minister, I have sometimes thought that Belfast was sitting there waiting to be promoted, but it does not happen often. Tonight the hon. Gentleman made a powerful speech, in which he drew attention to the important developments that have taken place in Belfast and why it is a good place in which to live and invest. I congratulate him on his remarks.

The hon. Gentleman raised a number of significant points, including the importance of concentrating on new technology. As Minister responsible for education in Northern Ireland, I know of the immensely good work within the two universities, which are producing high-quality graduates and, as was also pointed out, are doing so at a lower level of education through the NVQ system. We are now moving towards producing skilled people with a good qualification, who can take up the challenge of new technologies.

The hon. Gentleman referred to Belfast as the city of information, and I am sure that it will not let him down in that respect. Belfast will very much welcome his speech, which I hope will be heard by a wider audience than just the hon. Members present in the Chamber tonight.

The hon. Member for South Down also raised several points. He was worried that he had not seen the peace dividend. That concerns me. When we announced certain adjustments to budgets last year as a result of the onset of relative peace, we made it clear that they were the peace dividend and that if peace were to fail, those programmes would be at risk. We said that deliberately, because it is important to establish that a peace dividend depends on communities underpinning the peace that enables those resources to be made available.

In education, I concentrated on two specific projects. One was the initiative aimed at raising schools' standards, an important initiative that was well targeted towards schools that had faced problems in the past. The second provided assistance for primary 1 classes. Those two clear, distinct policies were made possible by the peace dividend and would not have been possible otherwise. My colleagues did the same in respect of other budgets, and about £286 million was reallocated in that way. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will appreciate not only that those resources were allocated in a specific way, but that he and the rest of the community on all sides in Northern Ireland must be fully aware that, if violence is resumed, those programmes will certainly be placed at severe risk.

Mr. McGrady: I thank the Minister for his additional information. Is he saying categorically that the peace funds were additional to those that would have been required and provided in the budget had peace not broken out?

Mr. Ancram: In respect of those that I control—and I understand that it was the same for my colleagues—it was made clear to us that they were additional funds and that we should find projects on which they could be spent with that in mind. If they were put into mainstream projects, those mainstream projects could be at severe risk if the security position changed. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will pass the message back to the community that peace has a dividend and that the ending of peace has a down side.

Several hon. Members mentioned electricity, including the hon. Member for South Down. We share electricity consumers' disappointment that at present, for a variety of reasons, tariffs are higher in Northern Ireland than in other regions of the United Kingdom. The Government no longer have a role in determining or approving electricity tariffs. The regulation of the privately owned industry is now the responsibility of the independent Director General of Electricity Supply for Northern Ireland.

Action is being taken on a number of fronts to address the problem of higher Northern Ireland electricity prices. In particular, I remind the House—as I have spoken about it in a previous debate—of the announcement on 12 March of £15 million in Government support for electricity consumers. That has enabled the average increase in electricity prices for the current year to be reduced by 3 per cent., to what, in effect, is below the rate of inflation. I hope that hon. Members will realise that that demonstrates the Government's concern.

The hon. Member for South Down made another assertion that requires a brief comment from me. He thought that the Industrial Development Board and the Local Enterprise Development Unit were not providing equity in the distribution of employment-creating projects throughout Northern Ireland. I have heard that before. The IDB now has a target of locating 75 per cent. of all new inward investment in areas of social need. It can give higher rates of grant to companies that go to those areas. The same is true of LEDU, which is making special efforts to concentrate resources and the effort and time of officials in those areas. Those are important signs of our determination to ensure that people in all parts of Northern Ireland benefit from the opportunities that we hope will continue to develop in an atmosphere of peace.

I should point out that, of 17 inward investment announcements made by the IDB since September 1994, three have been in Londonderry, two in Enniskillen, two in west Belfast and one in Newry. Those are all areas of special need. That demonstrates the importance that we place on meeting those particular needs.

The hon. Member for Barnsley, Central mentioned the thorny question of Action for Community Employment. I understand the concerns expressed about the reductions in that programme, which was introduced when unemployment was rising rapidly. Although I do not deny for a moment that unemployment remains a major problem, there are signs of improvement—I gave the House the figures. Unfilled vacancies are at record levels, with more than 7,000 on the books of the Employment Service. Our response was to refocus the use of resources, and that is the reason for the decisions that were taken. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, my noble Friend Lady Denton announced a £2 million package of transitional measures, to allow the schemes to manage the reduction in their activities.

The hon. Member for Greenock and Port Glasgow (Dr. Godman) went slightly beyond the terms of the motion in mentioning a number of matters, including UK fishing vessel decommissioning schemes. Detailed answers can be made available to the hon. Gentleman, and I shall make sure that that is done. My noble Friend recently welcomed the continuation of the decommissioning scheme, which will operate this year in the same way as last year, although the eligibility criteria have been widened by comparison with the scheme in the United Kingdom in 1995. Among the changes are that nephrops are now eligible, and the scheme will be open to more vessels by the lowering of the number of eligible days fished from 100 to 75 and the removal of the current restriction on licence type.

The hon. Gentleman made a special plea on ferries. I believe that his concern was directed more at Campbeltown and that part of Argyll than at Northern Ireland, but I shall draw that matter to the attention of my noble Friend Lady Denton and of my hon. Friend the Minister for Railways and Roads. I shall not reply in this debate.

Mr. Hume: May I reiterate, in support of the hon. Member for Greenock and Port Glasgow (Dr. Godman), that a ferry between Scotland and Northern Ireland is the subject of widespread interest in Northern Ireland?

Mr. Ancram: I am not sure whether the right hon. Gentleman was present when the hon. Member for Greenock and Port Glasgow was speaking, but he was honest to say that a ferry would be of great assistance to that part of Argyll.

The hon. Member for East Londonderry raised the question of Benelux in his constituency. I appreciate the concern that exists as a result of what has happened to that company. The IDB has been maintaining close contact with Benelux here and in Hong Kong, and the board has also made contact with a number of potential purchasers. Some have expressed interest, but none has yet entered substantive discussions. The IDB will continue to maintain those contacts.

I hope that I have dealt with most of the points that were raised. If not, I shall as usual write to hon. Members with full answers.

I shall finish with a point that was raised by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State in replying to the opening remarks of the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley, when he spoke about the importance of peace and political stability to the future well-being of Northern Ireland. We all understand that, whatever else we talk about in terms of the quality of life, prosperity and opportunity, at the end of the day those will be underpinned only by political stability and peace. There is not simply the risk that peace dividend reallocations will have to be recovered from the economic and social programmes and restored to the law and order budget. Peace and political progress are critical to the confidence that is the key to industrial and commercial investment and to the growth of industries in Northern Ireland—not least tourism. I cannot over-emphasise the importance of their achievement.

Anyone who claims to have any regard for the economic and social well-being of the people in Northern Ireland, particularly those who have suffered far too long from unemployment, is under the most compelling obligation to bring violence to an end, and for good. Anything else is hypocrisy and a cynical and cruel disservice to the community. Now is the time for dialogue to displace violence and threats of violence. No one can credibly claim that the opportunity for dialogue is being unreasonably withheld. There is a challenge to all

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politicians in Northern Ireland and to the Government. We are willing to undertake that challenge on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland. I look to the politicians of Northern Ireland to follow us in that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House takes note of the Northern Ireland Economic Council's Repo: No. 118, February 1996.

Cattle Disposal Scheme

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Morris): I have to announce that Madam Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

6.55 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I beg to move,

That this House expresses its concern at the continuing delay and confusion arising from the Government's cattle disposal scheme.

On Wednesday, it will be eight weeks since a bombshell was dropped in the House by two Ministers. During that period, a great industry has been devastated and that has already cost thousands of jobs, brought businesses to the brink of bankruptcy and driven many innocent people to despair. The long-term implications for the rural economy have still to be assessed.

My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I have consistently refused to indulge in recriminations about the original bovine spongiform encephalopathy outbreak. It will take time to investigate the full saga—why the outbreak happened in the UK on the scale that it did, why it has continued so long and who may have been responsible for the way in which the disease spread. Time is not on our side. Every day that goes by, with the beef sector still virtually paralysed, not only costs large sums of money but makes full recovery even less likely.

Before I deal with the scheme in detail, I shall dispose of one illusion. No doubt, Euro-sceptic Members will use the debate on Wednesday and Thursday to rail against other EU member states—especially the German and French Governments, now Conservative, with whom the Prime Minister claims to have a special relationship. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will use that relationship to good effect when President Chirac visits Britain.

The cattle disposal scheme is not a product of the export ban. True, the sabre rattling of some Conservative Back Benchers has not helped Ministers to make rapid progress with solutions. While that was done by the usual suspects on the Tory right wing, perhaps it did not matter much, but, a few days ago, in the middle of sensitive talks, the chairman of the 1922 Committee, no less, started demanding that the Government's allies should be "bludgeoned" into submission. Ministers clearly found that less easy to dismiss. No doubt they had to explain that the organisation in question is just an anachronistic club, that its chairman is of minimal importance, and that the word "bludgeon" is just an old Yorkshire expression for inviting somebody to take a more responsible view.

Tonight's debate is about a home-grown crisis facing the entire British beef industry. Of course the export ban is irrational. We must have it lifted and get rid of it, because no scientific basis for it remains. However, that ban is not responsible for the devastation that concerns us in this debate.

Mr. David Nicholson (Taunton): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way so early in his speech. He referred in his opening sentence to a bombshell being dropped on the industry in the House. He will recall the Minister's response to the statement by the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) in the House last Thursday, when he said that the Secretary of State for

Health had precipitated the crisis. In the *Western Morning News* of 27 March, Mr. Graham Watson, the Liberal Democrat Member of the European Parliament for Somerset and North Devon, said:

"If the Government had set out to cause mass panic they could not have gone about it in a more destructive fashion."

Are the hon. Gentleman, the hon. Member for Huddersfield and the Liberal Democrat Member of the European Parliament suggesting that our colleagues should have kept silent about the research which regrettably gave rise to this problem?

Mr. Tyler: Of course not. No doubt the hon. Gentleman will make an equally long speech if he catches the Chair's eye later, but as my speech develops he will get his answer.

The Government have accepted that the cattle disposal scheme is in their hands—it is their responsibility. In response to my private notice question last Tuesday, the Minister of State—he is in his place now—said:

"I am driving the scheme and I accept full responsibility for it."—[*Official Report*, 7 May 1996; Vol. 277, c. 20.]

So the buck stops with the Minister, not with Brussels. Indeed, he slapped down the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls), who suggested later that the problem was the fault of "the Europeans". The Minister, the right hon. and learned Member for Grantham (Mr. Hogg) and the Prime Minister all made similar statements later last week about the Government's responsibility—and they were right.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): In the exchange to which the hon. Gentleman has been kind enough to refer, I made the point that the beef ban was completely illegal and in defiance of all scientific opinion. How, therefore, can the hon. Gentleman have the effrontery to stand up and say what he has said when his party—the self-confessed federast party—would give away our remaining veto?

Mr. Tyler: I am sorry that I gave way; that was a ludicrous waste of the House's time. My point was simply the same as the Minister's: the cattle disposal scheme does not depend on the export ban being removed or vice versa. It is a separate issue that must be dealt with properly by Ministers. I know that they will attempt to do that during this evening's debate.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): I met the Minister on Thursday. The best that he could offer Wales was marrying up some renderers with one abattoir in north Wales and one in south Wales—for the whole country. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the scheme just is not a starter in Wales at this stage?

Mr. Tyler: I do agree—I shall come to that very issue. I return to my point that Ministers have frankly accepted responsibility for the scheme. Indeed, they can do no other because everyone knows that they are responsible for what has gone wrong. A poll in *The Guardian* on Friday showed that only 18 per cent. of the public blame the European Union for the beef crisis, while 45 per cent. blame the Government.

The scheme was dreamt up, designed and built in Whitehall. Anyone who suggests that it has been imported from the continent is trying to distract attention, to pass the buck, or to fight private battles.

Mr. Paul Marland (West Gloucestershire) *rose—*

Mr. Tyler: I shall give way later to the hon. Gentleman if he will be patient.

The House will know—I expect the hon. Gentleman knows—that there is now a shrewd suspicion among some of the victims of this calamity that some Conservative Members—only a minority, I am glad to say—are engaged in a fierce civil war over Europe in their party and want the ban to continue for as long as possible so that they can say that it is the fault of the Europeans. The Minister gave vent to frustration at their antics after the talks in Italy last week, and he was quite right. The president of the National Farmers Union was similarly scathing, warning that extra delays might occur as a result of their antics.

After nearly eight weeks, the disposal scheme is still characterised by dither and delay. If any hon. Member has not been briefed by his or her constituents over the weekend, let me read a brief extract from the editorial in this week's *Farmers Weekly*. Under the headline

"Chaos Reigns as MAFF Makes a Hash of its BSE Slaughter Scheme",

the editorial reads:

"Producers with cattle over 30 months old must be wondering what on earth the Government is playing at. Only a scriptwriter for a Whitehall farce could derive any satisfaction from its handling of the scheme to remove older cattle from the food chain."

[Interruption.] It continues:

"According to the NFU, it could take a year before the back-log is cleared. Many of the 100,000 cattle stuck on farms will be prime animals in late-maturing, grass-fed herds, caught up in this fiasco because, like cull cows, they are deemed unfit for human consumption . . . Beef producers are left waiting for compensation. So far, almost two months into this crisis, they have received nothing."

[Interruption.] It says:

"The calf slaughter scheme does not apply to them and intervention has proved almost worthless. Those with cattle on farms are left wondering how to minimise their losses. They must know soon whether top-up compensation is to be paid after the first four weeks and at what rate. Their state of confusion is inexcusable".

Mr. Alex Carlile (Montgomery): Given some of the sedentary interventions suggesting that my hon. Friend is out of date, would he agree with Mr. John Jones of Welshpool Livestock Auctioneers who has commented from today's livestock mart that the situation remains utterly chaotic because MAFF and the Welsh Office have licensed so few abattoirs?

Is my hon. Friend further aware that marts such as the huge and important Welshpool mart cannot place the beasts which they need to place in abattoirs? Mr. John Jones tells me that he has managed to find space for 35 of 2,000 candidates for slaughter from his mart alone. Will my hon. Friend join me in begging Ministers to increase the number of abattoirs licensed for the cull?

Mr. Tyler: I am grateful to my hon. and learned Friend for making that point, to which I shall come directly. If any Conservative Member has not been listening to abattoir managers and farmers during the past few days, he should get on the telephone this evening and find out what they are saying. I have talked to farmers as far apart as Lewes in Sussex, Dartmouth in Devon, Boston in Lincolnshire and Widnes in Cheshire. They describe the

[Mr. Tyler]

situation as a shambles—precisely what the Welsh Farmers Union said. The renderers are saying that the scheme will grind to a halt almost immediately; and the Scots are so desperate that they have turned to the Prime Minister and asked him to intervene—as if that were going to help.

With the help of the NFU and discussions with many others, I have been able to identify six principal concerns. As my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Montgomery (Mr. Carlile) rightly said, the reduction in the number of collection centres is a disaster. Last Tuesday, the Minister told me:

"Some 104 livestock markets and some 72 abattoirs have been approved as collection centres."

He wanted, he said,

"to ensure a proper geographical coverage of collection centres—both slaughterhouses and livestock markets."—[*Official Report*, 7 May 1996; Vol. 277, c.20.]

He said that about 200 had applied to join the scheme. There followed pressure from both sides of the House to the effect that that was not enough. I recall the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. Harris) making that very point.

Later in the week, we heard that the Minister was prepared to be flexible. More centres would be added—perhaps as many as 100. At the weekend, however, the renderers appeared to have the Government over a barrel, despite the Minister's promises last week that he had them under control. As a result, only 21 in the whole of England and Wales are to be licensed for the foreseeable future. Although MAFF has approved 96 abattoirs and 186 livestock markets to operate the scheme, the renderers are refusing to play ball. As the NFU said:

"The Government have consistently refused to establish a proper administrative framework for the scheme in England and Wales. In the absence of such a framework, renderers have indicated that, in England and Wales, they will deal with 21 abattoirs. These will meet their current maximum throughput of 18,000 carcases a week. This figure will rise to some 25,000 carcases a week only after several weeks. If these were the only cattle to be entered into the scheme, it would take up to a year to eliminate the backlog on farms which, across the United Kingdom as a whole, is estimated to be over 300,000. Each week a further 12,000 cull cows will join this backlog."

In the meantime, businesses are being ruined. I want to quote one specific case from one of the many letters that I have received. This one comes from Skegness and District Meat Traders Ltd. The group was on the Minister's schedule, sent to every Member of the House on 2 May—a designated and approved collection centre. The traders write:

"We applied and were passed and accepted by the Intervention Board as suitable to take part in the scheme. All arrangements with the Meat Hygiene Service, the Meat and Livestock Commission, local rendering plant, local hide collection had been confirmed. 100 cattle from local farms were booked in to come to us from 7 am on Saturday.

We had agreed to slaughter on 3 days per week to try and take the pressure off local farmers in our area, many with severe cash flow problems due to delays in the whole situation . . . We understand from information given to us in the last hour that the nearest abattoir is at Shrewsbury, only two in the whole Midlands area . . . We at this moment are destroyed, we don't know what to do—please, please help us!"

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick–upon–Tweed): Other marts on the list approved by the Government were unable to start the scheme because they were under the impression that they had to have a registration number after being inspected by the state veterinary service. When one of the marts in my constituency telephoned the intervention board, it spoke to a 15-year-old schoolchild on work experience who was unable to say whether it could start the scheme without state veterinary inspections.

Mr. Tyler: Such experiences have taken place all over the country in the past few days. I have had abattoirs ringing me today in desperation because they cannot get clear advice from the Ministry, the intervention board, or any other authority.

Mr. Marland: The hon. Gentleman is being very selective and he is out of date. He is not the only one who has been making telephone calls to find out what has been going on, because I have done exactly the same. I spoke to Gloucester market this morning and I was told that the situation is now working very smoothly. Of course, there have been a few hiccups along the way, but that is why I said that the hon. Gentleman is out of date. I stand by that. He quoted from a *Farmers Weekly* which is a week old and the article he read out must have been written at least 10 days ago. The situation is now moving ahead smoothly and the scheme is working.

Mr. Tyler: The hon. Gentleman is talking through his hat. He clearly does not read *Farmers Weekly*. I quoted Friday's edition—10 May—and I checked today about the information given. It is absolutely accurate. It may be that there is one place where the scheme is now in operation. If that is in Gloucester, good luck to Gloucester, but all over the country that is not the case.

Another of the statements that I have received today from a vet says:

"animals will have to travel much greater distances into large, factory abattoirs—remember these include some of the weakest and infirm of all cattle, the cow at the end of her working life."

I will come to the issue of casualty stock in a minute, because the animal welfare implications are causing considerable concern.

Mr. Marland: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tyler: I will not give way. If the hon. Gentleman cares to pick up the phone and to talk to the National Farmers Union, he will find that his information is incorrect. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We do not need the hon. and learned Member for Montgomery (Mr. Carlile) waving his hands and interfering in the debate from a sedentary position.

Mr. Tyler: I am sure that you will understand, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the frustration and anger that many of us feel that our constituents have been put into an impossible situation. Mishandling of the crisis is causing real human misery, as well as animal misery.

The issue of the distortion between live weight and dead weight caused concern to many hon. Members from both sides of the House last week and is certainly not resolved. The regulation authorising the scheme, approved by the Beef Management Committee on 12 April,

envisaged that animals would be brought into the scheme only at live weight centres, that is, at auction markets. That would have distorted the normal patterns of trade in older cattle, because some 50 per cent. are normally sold dead weight and it would have caused especial difficulty to those farmers who normally sell dead weight.

It was not until 26 April that the committee allowed dead weight purchase. It rejected the proposal, made by the slaughterers and by the NFU on behalf of farmers, to use an accurate conversion coefficient. Accordingly, the scheme encourages farmers to enter their steers and heifers into the scheme at the abattoirs instead of the normal marketing channels. Naturally, that is making the present blockage in the abattoirs even worse because everyone is trying to clamber in there as fast as possible. Last week, hon. Members warned the Government that that would happen, and nothing has been done to correct the distortion.

On the issue of valuation for compensation, beef farmers are facing huge losses. This morning, one south Devon specialist producer told me that he anticipates that his total loss will be in the region of £100,000 as a result of the crisis and the way that it has been handled.

Steers and heifers are, of course, considerably more valuable than cull cows. The EU-approved compensation rate is adequate to cover most of the losses sustained by the holders of cull cows, but it is far below the costs of production of steers and heifers. Hon. Members from both sides know that and they have been pressing the Government as we have.

The Government attempted to resolve the problem by agreeing to pay a 26p a kilogram live weight top-up. That supplement was first to be paid for the first four weeks, then during May, then until 10 June and finally on all steers and heifers on farms on 20 March whenever they are taken into the scheme. That is slow progress but, as the House will recognise, very confusing.

Meanwhile, a group of producers from the south-west has taken the initiative. The producers went to Brussels, they met the Commission and they sought a more flexible, realistic and fair compensation package. In brief, they wanted a full-price support scheme for suckler cows, with compensation for all cattle known to come from herds that have been hit by BSE, which they said would be essential to solve the problem. The reaction of the Commission is important. It said that the producers' ideas were well worth examining, but it told the farmers that they had to discuss the matter with MAFF. The matter is entirely in the hands of the United Kingdom's Ministers and not in the hands of the Commission. As one of the farmers who helped to put together the submission said to me today,

"I solely blame the Minister of Agriculture for his lack of understanding and speed to solve this crisis."

I will gladly provide details of that statement to the Minister.

The 30-month deadline caused consternation, not only in the House but in all parts of the industry. Who first floated the idea of the 30-month deadline? Strictly speaking, it was not the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee, which merely referred to it as a handy threshold, with some scientific basis, for deciding when deboning and destruction of offal should become compulsory. The idea that 30 months should be an indiscriminate deadline for any meat to prevent it from entering the human or animal feed chain seems to have come from the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food himself.

I refer the House to an important article in *The Daily Telegraph* by Christopher Booker and Richard North, who pointed the finger of blame in the Minister's direction. In interviews in the immediate aftermath of the first statement, the Minister referred to the possibility of a 30-month deadline, and to the possibility of culling "millions of cattle". Nobody had raised that issue until the Minister himself did. That overreaction, or overkill, did not start in Brussels, Bonn or Paris. It started in Whitehall, and hon. Members will agree with that.

At long last, after weeks of pressure, from us and from many others, the Government are examining the practicalities of what is called a "mature beef assurance scheme". Good. Exemptions are clearly essential for herds and breeds that can be demonstrated to be at low risk—Dexters is an obvious example, but there are many others. Otherwise, not only will perfectly healthy cattle be slaughtered—that raises legal as well as moral issues—but the scientific rationale for the whole of the Government's scheme will be killed off too.

Why are we still waiting? Why was the issue not addressed six weeks ago, in informal discussions with the Commission and the industry? When I visited Brussels and met Commissioner Fischler's team exactly three weeks ago, I was staggered to find that it had received no proposals, ideas or details at all from MAFF on that vital aspect of the problem. Even though such a scheme might not have achieved a partial relaxation of the export ban immediately, would it not have been wise to consult on exemptions? The Commission seems very receptive to the case for the later-maturing, naturally reared and fed prime beef, including those on organic farms. Why did our Ministers not push open that door and get the Commission's support early on? To come back now with the mature assurance scheme will be much more difficult.

In the meantime, the many delays in progressing the scheme have caused especial difficulty for those farmers who would normally have marketed their 30-month-old cattle in late March, April or early May. Those farmers are facing not only shortfalls in cash flow, but the cost of feeding their animals. I know that the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) has made that point in the House before.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): The hon. Gentleman is right to say that there is a serious welfare issue for the cattle that should have been slaughtered in the last week of March. There is no market for them. They are over 30 months of age and the market has gone because of the European Union's ban. May I help the hon. Gentleman with where the 30-month ban came from? If he reads today's National Farmers Union briefing, he will find that it came from the farming community.

Mr. Tyler: That is not true. I met the president of the National Farmers Union after the scheme had already been floated by the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food—he did so on television—in the previous three days. The hon. Gentleman is not correct on that point. I accept his support, however, and I am grateful to him. It is—

Mr. Greenway: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tyler: No.

[Mr. Tyler]

As the delays lengthened and the prospects of a rapid reduction in the backlog of cattle receded, the NFU became more and more determined to secure urgent priority for entry of animals into the scheme.

Delays in starting the scheme have led to huge problems in dealing with casualty stock. All scheme abattoirs must be required to take such stock to minimise animal welfare difficulties. In some major livestock areas of Britain—the highlands of Scotland, mid-Wales and the west country, for example—the combination of large numbers of cattle and small numbers of approved slaughter facilities is causing consternation. The south-west region of the NFU briefed me today. It told me that only three abattoirs are operating within the whole of its area. It commented:

"Although all abattoirs in the scheme will be required to make arrangements to deal with casualty stock, the lack of abattoirs in the scheme at the current time will mean excessively long journeys for some casualty animals and we will continue to lobby the renderers to take these animals from the local abattoirs which currently specialise in casualties."

Good for the NFU, but what is the Ministry doing? How can it mitigate the extra costs and avoid the risk of do-it-yourself slaughter, when farmers who are already in dire straits are faced with extra burdens?

In endorsing many of the issues to which I have referred, the Sussex farmers, whom I met near Lewes on Thursday, are especially frustrated with the calf slaughter scheme. Other farmers from Somerset to Sunderland have raised the same anxieties. The time scale is impossible. The intervention board is asking for precise notice of numbers three days in advance. The farmer can give notice only three days after birth. Delivery must take place within seven to 10 days. The window of opportunity is just too narrow. Real difficulties are arising in what is already a fraught situation. There appears to be no logical reason not to introduce an extension to at least 14 days. Surely that would be more reasonable.

In supporting that view, Messrs Snells, the wholesale butchers at Chard, Somerset, say that

"most abattoirs are killing calves at specific times on two days a week. This makes the ten day rule even harder."

The company comments that the two-hour limit for calves to arrive at the abattoir to be inspected is very tight, especially when a large consignment arrives.

The net sum that the farmer receives can be as little as £50, once all the others in the chain have taken their cut. Many producers are simply holding on to their Holstein calves. Where will they end up?

I have had time only to touch on the catalogue of problems from which the beef industry is reeling on the 55th day after the original BSE announcement. I could have provided more detail about the fate of the cattle head deboners. Their business was abolished overnight by the Minister's new regulations. No compensation was payable. It is difficult to think of any other industry that could be driven out of business by the failure of Government policy and have no redress. It is surely scant comfort for the deboners to be told, as Messrs Touchmead of Amesbury was advised by its Member of Parliament, that it should diversify.

There is the absurd fiasco that stems from proving the age of young heifers. Calling in the dentist proved to be a ludicrously inefficient option. A proper registration scheme seems to be a long way off. Vets are naturally reluctant to act as the Government's policemen, especially without even being consulted. I hope that the Minister will be able to tell us whether the vets have now been consulted.

Another factor is the power of supermarkets. They seem to be dictating what happens. Their activities deserve careful scrutiny. I understand that they threatened to undermine the best laid plans of Ministers by insisting that abattoirs do not process both cull cattle and beef for human consumption. That may be reasonable in some areas, but in other more remote areas there will be great difficulties. I see one or two Conservative Members nodding in agreement. The Minister failed completely to respond when my hon. Friend the Member for Southwark and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) put the matter to him on Thursday.

The chairman of the south-west region of the NFU wrote during the weekend to my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown). He stated:

"We are drifting daily into a very serious situation. Apart from the financial problems being experienced by our members there are the practical problems of feed and welfare. The uncertainties of it all are causing immense despair and there is of course huge long term damage being caused, not only to farming businesses, but to all allied trades as well."

There is not a farmer, a market manager, an abattoir owner or anyone else in the beef industry who will share the complacency that is set out in the Government's amendment. If Conservative Members had listened to their constituents during the past seven horrendous weeks, they, too, would find it impossible to hail the "progress" to which the amendment refers. Far from the Ministry driving the scheme, it seems to have been hijacked by the renderers and the supermarkets.

The purpose of the Minister's scheme is to hasten the eradication of BSE from the national herd, and by so doing to re-establish consumer confidence at home and abroad. My colleagues and I fully share that objective. Indeed, the objective is not in dispute. So far, however, it has been a dismal failure. No doubt the Ministry had a contingency plan, even if it did not have one before November 1995. Surely such a scheme must then have been initiated. Any responsible Government would surely have put a contingency plan in place immediately. If the Government did that, what was the plan? Was it what we now see? If so, why have things taken so long? Those whose livelihoods hang in the balance because of the debacle, given the dither and delay that have taken place over 55 days, are losing their patience.

I shall end with a quotation from a statement drafted by two Cornish farmers' wives. It was signed by 450 others from throughout the west country. They describe themselves as the

"farming community who are made to bear the brunt of political blunders."

They refer to

"the irreparable damage to our industry"—

that is the livestock industry, as the

"innocent victim of misdemeanours."

They ask whether the cattle feed producers will be prosecuted. They comment:

"After all, according to the scientists, this is where BSE originated, unknown to the farmer. These producers added the likes of sheep remains and offal etc. to cattle feed after the Government lifted regulations regarding the contents."

After 55 days of chaos and confusion, all those questions cannot remain unanswered any longer.

7.27 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Tony Baldry): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question and to add instead thereof:

"welcomes the Government's commitment to restoring consumer confidence in the UK beef industry by introducing a slaughter scheme for cattle over the age of 30 months; notes the progress made in the 30-month scheme; recognises the dependence of the scheme on co-operation between farmers, auctioneers, slaughterers and renderers and welcomes the steps taken to foster such co-operation to ensure that the maximum slaughter rates are achieved."

I welcome the opportunity to answer the questions posed by the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), who has come to the House to debate the 30-month cull without knowing who proposed it. It is clear that he has not even had the courtesy to read the briefing sent to every hon. Member by the National Farmers Union.

The announcement on 20 March by the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee that the most likely explanation of some recent cases of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease was exposure to bovine spongiform encephalopathy before 1989 had an immediate and devastating impact on many people, including thousands of farmers throughout the country. I fully appreciate what a painful and frustrating time they, their friends and their family have had recently. None of us can be insensitive to the difficulties that so many farmers have experienced.

I welcome the debate because it provides an opportunity for me to set out clearly the issues that I have had to confront. The House is made up of reasonable people, and I believe that, having heard what I have to say, it will conclude that all has been, and is being, done at all possible speed to ensure that the 30-month cull scheme works efficiently and effectively and that farmers will be able to move relevant stock from their fields as speedily as possible. They rightly and understandably want to be paid compensation as soon as possible, and I want them to receive it as soon as possible.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall spent the first five minutes of his speech trying to ascribe responsibility for the scheme. I could have saved him that five minutes. I accept full responsibility for ensuring the success of the scheme, which is why, each day, I convene and chair a meeting of all the relevant interests—farmers, those who work in abattoirs, renderers, members of the retail industry, vets and others. Many people are involved, and we must appreciate the number of complexities involved in this unprecedented scheme.

It is worth briefly recalling the time scale. In statements issued on 20 and 24 March, SEAC recommended—among other things—that the carcases of cattle aged over 30 months be deboned in licensed plants under the supervision of the Meat Hygiene Service. That is where the reference to 30 months first appeared. That recommendation gave a particular and immediate significance to the 30-month limit.

At once, retailers, keen to help restore confidence in British beef, wanted to be able to confirm to customers that they were selling only young beef, and that there was no possibility of older beef being on their shelves. Almost immediately, retailers told meat merchants and farmers that they were no longer willing to accept beef from animals aged 30 months and over. At a meeting on 25 March, retailer and farmer representatives decided to ask the Government to buy cattle aged 30 months and over to ensure that their meat and offal were removed from the human and animal food chain. That day, they came to see my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister and me, and we readily agreed to seek to implement the measure, in co-operation with retailers, farmers and others, as part of the moves to help restore confidence in British beef here and overseas.

If the hon. Member for North Cornwall feels at all confused about the origin of the scheme, he need only read the brief sent by the NFU to all Members of Parliament. It states:

"Taken together . . . a substantial proportion of our market had disappeared"

because the retailers, processors and caterers had informed the NFU that they were no longer willing to accept beef from carcases of cattle aged 30 months and over.

"The NFU reacted to these . . . events by requesting the UK Government to purchase cattle aged 30 months and older and to ensure that their meat and offals were removed from the human and animal food chain."

That request was made to us on 25 March. We had obtained all the necessary clearances and agreed to it by 28 March, and by 3 April we had secured the Council of Ministers' agreement to Community funding of the costs of buying cattle into the scheme. I hope that no one will believe that any of the negotiations with Community colleagues have been particularly easy. At that meeting on 3 April, compensation payments were set at 1 ecu per kg for cattle purchased live—approximately 86p per kg—and double that rate for dead weight. That decision was to prove significant later.

In its briefing, the NFU rightly described our response to it and the retailers as "rapid and welcome" but, obviously, it took a little time to negotiate the details of such a complex scheme—its complexity was unprecedented, here and elsewhere in Europe—with Community colleagues. The basic regulation, however, was adopted on 12 April—again, very rapidly.

I note that the Opposition Benches seem to be emptying. No Labour Back Benchers have been present throughout the debate, and the Liberal Democrats now seem to be filing out of the Chamber. I hope, however, that Conservative Members who are concerned about these matters will pay attention to the chronology. It was necessary to seek amendments to the basic regulations twice, on both occasions to meet concerns expressed by the NFU, the Country Landowners Association and other farming interests. The hon. and learned Member for Montgomery (Mr. Carlile) intervened from a sedentary position earlier to say that we had not listened. We have listened carefully. We have sought to meet the legitimate concerns of farming and other interests, and throughout the process I have tried to respond to those understandable concerns.

The first issue on which we sought, and succeeded in obtaining, the Community's agreement was the provision of a nationally funded supplement to be payable on steers and heifers. Steers and heifers aged over 30 months are

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considerably more valuable than cull cows that have reached the end of their milking lives. While the original compensation rates agreed by the Community were adequate to cover losses being sustained by owners of cull cows, it was felt that they did not fairly meet the costs of rearing steers and heifers. That is why we agreed, and made clear, that there would be a top-up payment of not less than 25p per kg live weight for the first four weeks of the scheme, after which a review would take place.

I have decided that the review should take place on 15 June. Because it is possible—indeed probable—that not all steers and heifers aged more than 30 months on 30 March will have been slaughtered by then, I have agreed that those animals will attract, and continue to attract, the top-up payment of 25p whenever they come to be slaughtered. In other words, any farmer who has heifers and steers on his farm that were there and more than 30 months old on 20 March will receive a 25p top-up payment whenever his cattle are slaughtered. I hope that that goes some way towards allaying the concerns of farmers who, understandably, were particularly anxious to get their cattle through the scheme while they thought the 25p top-up rate was available.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall mentioned that other NFU members wanted another scheme. If that is the case, they certainly have not put it to me through the union. If they had, I would have considered it. I think that there is a general recognition by the NFU, the CLA and other farming interests that the 25p top-up is very fair, especially if it applies to every heifer and steer that was on farms on the relevant date of 20 March and it is available whenever such a beast is slaughtered.

Mr. Alex Carlile: If the scheme that the Minister has described is to work, the cull must not merely be announced, but take place. Why will he not announce today a substantial increase in the number of available abattoirs—including those in Wales—so that it can take place? Will the industry receive a response to the legitimate concerns that it has raised repeatedly with the Minister in meetings, including a meeting involving John Jones of Welshpool Livestock Auctioneers, to whom I referred earlier?

Mr. Baldry: I hope that the hon. and learned Gentleman—and, indeed, every Member of Parliament from an English or Welsh constituency—received a letter from me today explaining the position. The letters were sent first class on Friday, and I made certain that every hon. Member would receive a copy. I trust that the hon. and learned Gentleman read in the letter about the logistical difficulties caused by the finite nature of rendering capacity—which I shall explain in a moment—and about the position in Wales, which I set out in terms.

There are no renderers in Wales, and I cannot create any by means of some divine intervention. Because, under the scheme, every beast must be rendered in its entirety, it must be matched with rendering capacity in England. That is why I made it clear in the letter that I sent the hon. and learned Gentleman and every other colleague that, under the scheme, I had designated three abattoirs specifically to take cattle from Wales: Anglesey, Abergavenny and Shrewsbury. If the hon. and learned Gentleman adds up the take—on the back of the "Dear Colleague" letter, the abattoirs and their throughput are set out—he will find that, together, those three abattoirs will take 25 per cent. of the initial kill. The Welsh herd is 16.5 per cent. of the national total so, rather than doing less well, the Welsh community is doing slightly better than average in the first few weeks.

The second amendment of the scheme that was necessary was not achieved until 5 pm on 26 April—again at the request of the NFU and the CLA—when the European Community agreed that there should be a dead weight option on the scheme.

Sir Hector Monro (Dumfries): We are now having a good deal of success in Scotland. A significant number of beasts have gone to the slaughterhouse—the number is now in the thousands rather than in the hundreds—but may I take my hon. Friend back a short while to heifers, which are at a full stop? No one is taking heifers at the moment. May we have a simpler method of arriving at the heifer age than the four teeth, because they must be got away soon? No one, however, seems to know quite how we are to do it.

Mr. Baldry: There are two points there. First, we hope and intend to have an identification scheme for all heifers by next month. Secondly, the CLA, the NFU and all farming interests that have made representations to me—I think that this has been agreed by everyone—have said that, given the problems of people who have heifers and steers, under the scheme, priority in the first instance should be given to clean beef.

Mr. John Greenway: My hon. Friend is right in all that he has said to the House and I am most grateful for his work in trying to resolve the extremely difficult problem of matching rendering capacity to the requirement for slaughter through abattoirs, but the fact is that there is just not enough rendering capacity. The need, however, to bring forward more cattle for early slaughter is extremely great. Will he consider using all available cold storage facilities so that we can have cattle in a large number of abattoirs and so that we can target a bigger number than the 25,000 per week that he is talking about slaughtering?

Mr. Baldry: Absolutely. Again, as I hope every colleague will have read, in the letter that I sent them on Friday I set that out in terms. Of course we have a finite rendering capacity. I cannot do anything to change that. What I can do is increase the rate of slaughter by bringing on more cold storage and, having rendered only those parts of each animal that need immediately to be rendered, store the rest for it to be rendered later. At present, I estimate that, under the scheme, the throughput in England and Wales is some 18,000 beasts a week. I hope that, in the next few weeks—I enclosed a bar chart showing every hon. Member how I saw the progress of the scheme—we will increase that figure to 22,000 beasts a week and start to make some real dent in the backlog, as well as keep up to date with the immediate scheme.

Mr. Marland: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is astonishing that, not even an hour into this debate in Liberal party time, two senior Liberal party spokesmen, not having read the NFU brief and not knowing whether there are any renderers in Wales, have been shown to have

done so little homework? It is a disgraceful performance by the Liberal party. Does my hon. Friend agree that that lack of homework undermines everything that they have been saying?

Mr. Baldry: What is disappointing is this. Everyone recognises that these are unprecedented circumstances that have been created by no one in the House and by no one in particular in the farming community or elsewhere. SEAC made proper recommendations, which we have sought to act on and to which, as I have described, the market has responded. Since then, we have all been seeking to work co-operatively. If the NFU and the CLA came to hon. Members and said, "We believe that the Minister of State has grossly failed"—or, indeed, failed at all—"in his duties," it would be right to have such a debate in the House, but in my meetings with the NFU, the CLA and other interest groups, I have persistently said, "Is there any issue that you wish me to consider that you feel I have not fully considered and taken action on?" I am confident that there is no issue that I have been asked to take forward by the various interests that I have not taken forward.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Baldry: I should like to make some progress.

Farmers and, I think, everyone else involved in the beef industry were anxious that, so far as possible, the 30-month cull programme should not disrupt existing patterns of business. Although many farmers continue to take their cattle to their livestock markets to sell, in recent years, there has been an increasing trend towards selling cattle dead weight—selling them direct to the abattoir. The NFU and the CLA were anxious that those traditional marketing patterns should be continued and we recognise that many producers prefer cattle to be marketed direct from farm to abattoir.

That is why, at the request of farming unions and of abattoir owners, we pressed the European Commission for changes in the regulations to enable such direct sales to continue. Again, those were not easy negotiations. I think that it is fair to say that there was a fair deal of suspicion, and considerable reticence, on the part of some Community colleagues about allowing the scheme to continue with a dead weight option, as they believed that it would become even more flexible and potentially more expensive.

Ideally, it would have been possible to secure agreement to a set of conversion coefficients from dead weight to live weight which would vary according to the type of beast—for example, one coefficient for cows, another for steers and another for heifers. There were two constraints. Importantly, the conclusions that have already been reached, and which I have mentioned, by the Council of Agriculture Ministers at their meeting on 3 April, in which a conversion coefficient from dead weight to live weight of two is clearly implied, combined with the reluctance of officials elsewhere in Europe to make the scheme even more flexible, meant that, within the politics of the possible, a coefficient of 2:1 was the best achievable in all the circumstances.

I do not think that there is any disagreement that that coefficient is slightly ungenerous for cull cows, but it has the advantage that it offers a better return than would otherwise be available on steers and heifers. It therefore serves to boost the returns of the specialist beef farmers. As that group was especially concerned that it had been disadvantaged by the earlier compensation measures, that potentially extra money has been welcomed by farmers unions.

I appreciate that concerns have been expressed, especially by people representing the livestock marts, that the coefficient will tend to encourage producers of steers and heifers to make use of the dead weight option rather than sell their cattle through live auction marts, but as I said, a significant number of clean cattle have been going dead weight recently. For cull cows, the coefficient is likely to favour sale through auction marts. When I have discussed this issue, at some length, with the leaders of the NFU and the CLA, that has certainly been their collective view.

Once the backlog of cattle on farms is reduced, the majority of cattle slaughtered under the scheme will be cull cows, so the coefficients that we have are to the advantage of specialist beef producers, who will receive more for their cattle, and the owners of cull cows. I am sure that, under the scheme, live markets will continue to play an important role, and I say that as the hon. Member for Banbury—the centre of my constituency has the largest cattle market in Europe.

Incidentally, I am glad that the people who represent the abattoirs nationally have agreed to protocols with the livestock markets to ensure the full participation of designated licensed markets as collection points under the scheme. Under the agreed protocol, abattoirs will give an allocation to livestock marts of 30-month scheme animals on the basis of the proportion of business that they were taking from livestock marts before 20 March. In that way, both the livestock marts and the abattoirs hope that the livestock marts will be able to play a valuable role in acting as collection centres and to be confident that they will then have abattoir and rendering facilities available to them. I congratulate both the livestock marts and the abattoirs on their constructive approach on the matter.

Mr. Beith: The Minister seems to be aware of the problem, but is perhaps underestimating its seriousness. If on a 700 kg animal there is a £200 premium for treating it as dead weight, specialist beef farmers will be drawn into using the abattoir directly, thereby putting the local mart, upon which they depend in good times, out of business. Other beef farmers will find it impractical to take that option, and will be at a financial loss.

Mr. Baldry: I know that none of the farm interests would wish to have the dead weight option or the dead weight coefficients taken away. If Liberal Democrat Members went out into the highways and byways saying that they would take this money away from farmers, they would receive a dusty response. It is recognised that there are swings and roundabouts. I suspect that more business will go live weight through cull cows to the livestock marts because the coefficients make it to farmers' advantage to do it that way. There will be considerable benefits to clean beef producers of going to abattoirs and to the owners of cull cows of going to the livestock mart. The fact that abattoirs and livestock marts have agreed a

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basis on which cattle can be called forward from livestock marts that are collection centres to be dealt with by the abattoirs is good news.

Mr. Nicholls: My hon. Friend has said a number of times that he cannot be expected to conjure rendering facilities out of thin air. Perhaps he can speak about a particular problem that has been put to me by the NFU. It concerns casualty animals. Does he feel able to say to the United Kingdom Renderers Association that it is artificially restricting its activity to 20 abattoirs and that one of the consequences is that it is virtually impossible to dispose of casualty animals humanely? That is a well-founded point and, although it is not the Minister's fault, he may be able to do something about it.

Mr. Baldry: I certainly intend to speak about casualty stock. The hon. Member for North Cornwall mentioned six points, and I intend to deal with all of them. One concerned casualty animals. I hope to be able to reassure my hon. Friend that we have in place proper provision for casualty stock. I shall continue to tell every abattoir in the scheme—not just the 21 that are in it at the moment, but the larger number which I hope will come into it—that a precondition of being in the scheme is that they must take a commonsense approach to casualty animals that are in need of emergency slaughter. I shall deal with that in greater detail.

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman (Lancaster) *rose—*

Mr. Tyler *rose—*

Mr. Baldry: The hon. Member for North Cornwall is brave if he thinks that he can come between me and my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster (Dame E. Kellett-Bowman).

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman: I thank my hon. Friend and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for having the good sense to choose Lancaster as one of the centres. It has a popular auction and many live weight cattle are brought to it. We are delighted about that, but there is a slight problem in that, like others, we are rather short of abattoir space. Would it be possible to open in the near future the abattoirs at Clitheroe and Oldham, which we have at the top of the list? That would give our market an enormous boost.

Mr. Baldry: My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Sir M. Lennox-Boyd) wrote to me today making a similar point. I want to get more abattoirs on stream as soon as possible, but to do that I have to be able to bring on stream more cold storage capacity. I hope to do that in the next two or three weeks. There is a finite number of renderers, and more abattoirs without cold storage facilities would force the renderers to use their limited amount of transport to visit more abattoirs. That would be less efficient and lead to a smaller throughput.

I hope that all hon. Members appreciate that the scheme will be in place for some months and that we must get it right. It is important to proceed in good order. As we introduce more cold storage facilities, we can use more abattoirs. There are some excellent facilities. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) has an excellent abattoir in his constituency, and I hope to bring it on stream in the near future. Cold storage will enable us to store parts of beasts that do not need to be rendered immediately. I want to clear the backlog as speedily as possible.

Sir Mark Lennox-Boyd (Morecambe and Lunesdale): My hon. Friend will appreciate that there are many interventions because this is a complicated scheme. He is to be congratulated because what he is trying to do is unprecedented. I should like to add to what my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster (Dame E. Kellett-Bowman) said. In the north-east, there are five slaughterers on the list of 21, and in the north-west there are two. I do not want to engage in beggar-my-neighbour tactics, but I think that my hon. Friend will agree that his reasoning, which I am sure is well thought out, should be explained either now or in the winding-up speech so that no one in the north-west feels that he is being disadvantaged. The figures need clarification, and I am sure that my hon. Friend can give it.

Mr. Baldry: I certainly do not intend any part of the country to become disadvantaged. As the scheme develops, in parts of the country where there is a need for greater slaughter capacity more speedily, we shall bring on more abattoirs. I want to ensure that the scheme gives confidence to consumers and retailers that only young beef is entering the UK market. I also want to ensure that farmers are confident that they will be paid speedily and that all hon. Members are confident that the scheme is running efficiently.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Baldry: I shall make some more progress and then give way to my hon. Friend.

We sought amendments to the original regulations at the behest of farming interests to get a top-up premium for heifers and steers and a dead weight option. It was not until late on 26 April that it was possible to obtain final agreement to the various provisions of the scheme that had been requested on behalf of farmers. Our success in getting agreement for a top-up payment for steers and heifers and a dead weight option has been greatly appreciated by the industry. The following weekend, immediately after the Friday when we secured agreement to the dead weight option, officials in MAFF and the intervention board worked throughout the weekend to ensure that abattoirs and livestock marts that might tentatively have become collection centres had all the necessary information as speedily as possible. That was got to them on 30 April, and the first animals under the scheme were slaughtered on 3 May.

As some of my hon. Friends have said, this is an unprecedented scheme—the largest and most complicated slaughter programme that has ever been introduced in this country. After all the regulations had been agreed, a number of legitimate sectoral and industry concerns had to be met. It is important for everyone to recognise that every animal slaughtered under the scheme has to be rendered prior to disposal. It is not possible simply to

slaughter and store a whole carcase. Waste material amounting to 30 to 40 per cent. of every animal has to be immediately rendered.

The UK has a finite rendering capacity. Prior to 20 March, huge amounts of animals that are now having to be rendered would have gone into the human food chain. It is impossible simply to introduce further rendering capacity overnight. I cannot suddenly find that capacity: it would take several months. In addition to rendering for the 30-month cull scheme, renderers continue to have to render offal from animals under the age of 30 months for the retail industry. I do not think there is any dispute about the accuracy of the renderers' estimation. There was a suggestion earlier that, in some way, the renderers were holding people to ransom. That was an unworthy suggestion. Judging by the groups that I have met, there is no doubt that the maximum rendering capacity that is available for the scheme is some 18,000 animals a week in England and Wales, and approximately 25,000 a week throughout the United Kingdom. I hope that we shall reach the target of 18,000 animals this week and in subsequent weeks until we start to introduce cold storage. As I said in my letter to hon. Members, I hope to increase that capacity in the coming weeks.

Mr. Bruce: I intervene because I know that, every time I have been to see my hon. Friend about matters concerning my farmers, he has been extremely adept at finding a way through for them. Needless to say, South Dorset farmers are very concerned. They have had their dead weight scheme and a local abattoir has been designated—S. J. Norman and Sons at Bridport. Unfortunately, now that the abattoir is telling them that they can send in their cattle, they have been told that the renderers will not come and service them, so they cannot take their cattle in. I raise that point only because I know that my hon. Friend will have an instant answer. If he does not, I am perfectly happy to start up the barbecue in my garden. If no one wants to come and eat, it will of course get burnt, but if they do, we will give it away.

Mr. Baldry: I fully understand that. The abattoir at Bridport is excellent and, as I said, I hope to be able to bring it into the scheme in the very near future. What happened was that the abattoirs, the renderers and the trade associations representing the abattoirs and renderers had discussions to seek to ensure that the maximum rendering capacity would be used now and in the foreseeable future.

Renderers have only finite transport facilities; there is a huge logistical issue. It made much more sense if a limited number of renderers were connected to the finite number of abattoirs in the first instance, and that is what has happened. I sent out details of that to hon. Members, in letters which I hope they received today. As I have told the House—I keep on about it because I think that it is fair that everyone should understand it—I am very keen to bring on extra abattoir capacity, including Bridport, just as soon as humanly possible, and just as soon as I can get cold storage facilities, which I reckon will be in the next two or three weeks.

I believe that it is very important that we increase the kill rate under the scheme as quickly as possible so that we can clear the backlog and farmers can be paid.

Mr. Cynog Dafis (Ceredigion and Pembroke, North): I draw the Minister's attention to the situation in south-west Wales—the county of Dyfed—where we have a very large dairy herd with many cull cows waiting to be processed. Two abattoirs have been designated for this purpose—Dewi James Cardigan and Oriel Jones Llanybydder—yet no animals have been processed through them. Can the Minister give me any good news about when he feels animals can begin to move from that very important region through those slaughterhouses?

Mr. Baldry: I had hoped that I had dealt with that point, but let me deal with it again. I have given directions that one of the abattoirs—ABP Shrewsbury, which is teamed up with the renderers at Widnes and is slaughtering five days, at 580 cattle a day, or 2,900 a week—should be dedicated to taking cattle from Wales. I made that clear in the letter that I sent every hon. Member on Friday. At Abergavenny, there will be five days' slaughtering, at 150 cattle a day, which is 750 a week. In addition, Welsh Country Foods, at Anglesea, is slaughtering cattle for north Wales. If we take the total of those three, it comes to 25 per cent. of the immediate kill in England and Wales for the next two or three weeks.

I am told that the Welsh herd makes up about 16.5 per cent. of the English and Welsh herd. I think and I hope, therefore, that colleagues in Wales will feel that, in the context of the initial stages of this programme, Wales is not being treated unfairly. As in the rest of the United Kingdom, I very much hope that it will be possible to bring on extra slaughter capacity in Wales in the very near future—in the next two to three weeks, and as soon as we can get more cold storage facilities.

None of us can increase that rendering capacity simply by wishing or willing it. The capacity is finite. It is important that everyone appreciates that. I think that everyone—farmers, those involved in the beef industry, hon. Members and our constituents—is anxious that the scheme should start to run at its maximum capacity as speedily as possible.

Given the limitations of the transport facilities immediately available to renderers, it was agreed that it was sensible to link up individual renderers with individual abattoirs to ensure maximum throughput to the renderers in the scheme. That has happened, and I hope that, this week, slaughtering and rendering will take place at the maximum capacity.

This is a new scheme, and I do not doubt that, on day one or two, there may well be one or two places where slaughtering does not take place as speedily as it might. A couple of abattoirs have told me that their throughput today was slower than it might have been because they had to do a large number of television interviews. As the scheme gets up and going, however, I hope that the maximum rendering capacity will be met.

I want to do more, of course, which is why I am recommissioning cold storage facilities, but they will take two to three weeks to be recommissioned and to come back on line. It must also be remembered that, even when we have further cold storage facilities, it is not possible just to slaughter and store. Part of every animal that is slaughtered has to be rendered, so I am working closely with the intervention board, abattoirs and renderers to sort out the logistical issues associated with bringing into the scheme a further large number of abattoirs, but ensuring that the animals are taken away as soon as possible after they are slaughtered and with the appropriate parts taken away to a scheme renderer.

[Mr. Baldry]

I have circulated to every hon. Member in England and Wales a chart that demonstrates how I believe the throughput might look, with the processing in England and Wales reaching about 22,000 by the beginning of July. That will involve our storing a considerable volume of stock, which will have to be rendered at some time in the future.

I know that some concern has been expressed by some abattoirs that feel they have been struck off the list of approved abattoirs. I hope that I have made it clear to the House that that is not the case. Everyone recognises—I recognise—that it would be sensible to involve more abattoirs, but there is no point in more abattoirs becoming involved until we can, in the next two to three weeks, increase substantially the flexibility of the renderers by using cold storage facilities for a product that does not need to be rendered immediately. That will enable us to increase the throughput under the scheme substantially.

My best estimate, once we have cleared the backlog, is that the scheme will involve about 15,000 animals being processed a week, including cull cows and clean beef in England and Wales, although I anticipate that the impact of the 30-month scheme will change the husbandry of many beef producers. It is likely that, as farmers find that they can get a better price for any stock under 30 months, less clean beef will come into the scheme. I hope that the House will recognise that, in England and Wales—where weekly throughput needs to be 15,000, and 22,000 will be achieved in the not-too-distant future—it should be possible to clear the backlog in a reasonable time. I hope that it will be possible to go beyond 22,000. If it is, we shall certainly seek to do so.

It is clear that it will not be possible to cull every animal tomorrow or this week, and I know that farmers appreciate that fact. The NFU, the CLA and everyone else involved has indicated that they think it would be sensible, at the outset, to give priority to clean beef, although proper regard has to be had for casualty stock, of which I shall say a little more in a moment.

There had been requests for MAFF to work out some prioritisation scheme. I am sure that the House will appreciate that, once the backlog is cleared, the available rendering and slaughter capacity will be greater than the throughput needed under the scheme, so once the backlog is cleared, farmers should have no difficulty getting their cattle culled almost immediately, provided that they give the collection centres proper notice. We are considering a comparatively short-term issue of sorting out whose cattle will be slaughtered when the cattle in the immediate backlog are dealt with.

My instinct, and I suspect the instincts of a large number of hon. Members, is that any scheme of prioritisation devised by officials is, with the very best will in the world, likely to be more bureaucratic, more inflexible and to involve greater delays. When I asked the NFU what sort of system of prioritisation it would recommend, it said that it would have to have regard to the number of animals on the farm, the viability of the farm, the profitability of the farm and many other criteria.

I do not think that it takes much imagination to recognise that such an approach will be incredibly time consuming and that it will involve every farmer with substantial extra paperwork at a time when they could do without any more intrusions into their businesses. Such paperwork would then have to be processed, decisions would have to be taken and farmers would have to be informed. It does not take long to recognise that it would be far better for livestock marts, abattoirs and farmers to work out together how to get the maximum sensible throughput. Although some forbearance on the part of a number of farmers will be required during the first few weeks, I am sure that co-operation at local level is far better than some centrally planned bureaucracy seeking to ascertain when every cow is killed at every abattoir.

Let me make it clear that I am chairing a committee that involves the chairmen, chief executives and equivalent of all the interests involved in the scheme—the NFU, the CLA, livestock marts, renderers, abattoir owners, vets, the retail industry and so on. At present, we meet daily, and we will continue to meet regularly. If there appear to be any problems in particular parts of the country, or if any particular abattoirs or other players in the scheme appear not to be complying with the spirit of the scheme, they will find me on their doorstep, wanting an explanation. Let me also make it clear that there are considerable controls throughout the process to ensure that there can be no scintilla of a risk that any meat from the 30-month cull scheme can ever re-enter the food chain.

The House will know that animals will have to be slaughtered on separate days and that the meat is immediately stained and taken away—which means that it is rendered immediately or stored prior to subsequent rendering. If there is any suggestion or suspicion that any collection centre and/or abattoir is not complying fully and strictly with the controls, I have made it clear that it will be suspended immediately.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): Will the Minister consider a problem that was raised with me today? He keeps talking about the rendering problem and the need to deal with 21,000 animals but, as so many animals will be kept longer on the farm, they will be of above average weight. The Minister should therefore be thinking in terms of tonnes for processing rather than the number of beasts. He is likely to find that the situation is worse than he is describing.

Mr. Baldry: There is no doubt that, in the first few weeks of the scheme, we shall be taking a large number of heifers and steers, or clean beef. There is no mystery, and I do not think that anyone involved in the scheme failed to recognise that fact. It is for that reason that the NFU, the CLA and everyone else involved indicated that they hoped that collection centres and livestock marts, and abattoirs in their slaughter programmes, would give priority in the early stages to clean beef.

I was asked what was being done about animals in need of special emergency slaughter. I take very seriously the need to maintain animal welfare and consumer confidence. Animal welfare is very important. As I said, I have made it clear to all abattoirs in the scheme that they must take a commonsense approach to dealing with animals in need of special emergency slaughter, or slaughter that would take place on the farm. If I find that any abattoir is not participating in the scheme on that basis, it will be suspended from the scheme.

In addition, it also seems sensible to commission a network of incinerators across the country to deal with casualty animals, those which need special emergency

slaughter and those which have been killed on the farm. I shall ensure that, tomorrow, all the regional veterinary officers have a list of 10 incinerators which we estimate are capable of taking casualty fallen animals in that way.

Some people may ask why we are not using the incinerators to deal with more of the cull at the outset. The answer is simply that the incineration capacity is finite, but it will help to deal with casualty animals. Another question, which I have considered with the NFU, the CLA and other interested bodies, is why we do not use small specialist abattoirs to deal just with casualty stock. The answer is that it is important to have efficient and effective controls under the scheme. None of us wants there to be any suggestion that the wrong meat is going back into the food chain. The scheme has to be policed rigorously.

Everyone I met agreed that the best way forward was to ensure that the abattoirs, of which an increasing number will be involved in the scheme, are prepared to take casualty stock and that, in addition, the animals that cannot be taken to abattoirs, but which have to be killed on the farm, can be taken to an incinerator which is designated as a collection point and able to pay the farmers involved. This scheme is regarded by all those involved as the best that could be devised in the circumstances.

Mr. Elliot Morley (Glanford and Scunthorpe): Will the Minister clarify the compensation arrangements for animals that die or are killed on the farm? Will the compensation arrangements be the same? We would not want injured animals being dragged alive to collection centres in order to meet the compensation criteria.

Mr. Baldry: I had hoped that I had made that clear. The compensation arrangements will be exactly the same, which is why I shall be designating incinerators as collection centres. Incinerators will be paid, and we estimate that it is perfectly possible, to within exactly the same tolerances as might be found at livestock marts, to weigh the lorries. I am sure that the scheme will have the full co-operation of the veterinary profession which, like my hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) and others, expressed understandable concern. I met representatives of the profession today and they believe that the scheme can work.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): My hon. Friend has concentrated mainly on the needs of the farming community, which I quite understand, but he and I know that we are dealing with tens of thousands of live animals. As a result of the illegal actions of the European Union and the hysterical response of some major traders such as McDonald's, we are facing what my hon. Friend has described as the largest slaughter programme this country has ever known. What specific measures will be implemented throughout this enormous but wholly unnecessary slaughter to ensure that the welfare of the animals is not disregarded?

Mr. Baldry: As I said, the welfare of the animals is paramount. The same very strict safeguards apply in this process as elsewhere. The slaughter of every animal will take place in licensed, designated abattoirs in the presence of the state veterinary service, which has the highest professional standards. The service is committed to maintaining the highest standards of animal welfare in the country, and—

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman: The world.

Mr. Baldry: Indeed, in the world. If I find a scintilla of a suggestion that any abattoir is failing to meet animal welfare standards, or any other standards, it will be suspended from the scheme.

I shall conclude by making two detailed points so that I am confident that I have replied to every criticism that has been made. The first relates to exemption for specialist herds. We are working on that. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton (Mrs. Browning), issued a consultation paper on specialist herds on 3 May. It was issued after she had had extensive meetings with farmers and others involved in the industry to ensure that it commanded their support. After the consultation period, we shall negotiate with Community colleagues to ensure that there are exemptions for that beef of more than 30 months.

We must not forget, however, that the genesis of the scheme rests not with us or with Brussels, but with market forces, retailers and others saying that, in the light of the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee's recommendations, they no longer felt confident about taking meat from animals of more than 30 months. However, we hope that the exemption scheme will succeed in protecting Dexter cattle and others.

Secondly, the calf processing aid scheme is a Community scheme which has never been used before. It is being taken off the shelf, never having been practised before. It is important that we have got it up and running, but changes need to be made to it. We shall have to negotiate those changes with Community colleagues. For example, it seems sensible to try to increase the 10-day limit to a 21-day limit.

I am grateful for the opportunity to explain what the Government have been doing. I very much hope that, having heard my explanation of the way in which we are approaching various policy issues, the House will feel confident that the scheme is being taken forward with all due diligence and speed. We are always conscious of the many farmers who wish to receive compensation as speedily as possible, and I am determined that they shall do so.

8.18 pm

Mr. David Harris (St. Ives): I am genuinely grateful to the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) for introducing the debate. Undoubtedly, as he said, and as I am sure all my hon. Friends who speak in the debate will agree, very real hardship is being inflicted on the farming community. Like every other hon. Member who has the privilege to represent a farming community constituency, I have received many representations and letters from desperately worried farmers.

I am also genuinely grateful to my hon. Friend the Minister for dealing fully and at great length with the points of criticism. If I have a criticism of my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall—I should like to call him that—in this debate, it is that he gave the impression, or was in danger of doing so, that, somehow, matters could be dealt with swiftly, easily and without difficulty. Indeed, the impression was that all the means of solving the problem were in the hands of my hon. Friend the Minister. Oh, that that were the case. It was not.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall was so right to stress that the scheme was at the behest particularly of the National Farmers Union, as my hon. Friend the Minister

[Mr. David Harris]

stated very clearly in his letter. We all knew at the outset of the operation that there would be horrendous complications. Wherever one looked, one could see yet more ramifications of and difficulties arising from the process. Of course, not all the problems could have been foreseen. Some of them were foreseen—we knew at the outset that there would be problems with disposal.

I suppose that most hon. Members—I certainly speak for myself—had no idea of the state of the rendering industry. Frankly, one has always taken it for granted. It just happened that not many of us in the House were experts on the rendering industry. Clearly, as my hon. Friend the Minister rightly stressed, the difficulty and cause of frustration in the past few weeks has been the limitations on the rendering industry and the way in which it has chosen to go about handling the situation.

I pay tribute to the NFU, which has been in the front line of the crisis in handling all the calls from individual farmers. Like other hon. Members who represent constituencies in the south-west, I have received a briefing paper from the NFU in the south-west. It says unfairly that the Government

"must take charge of the situation",

as if my hon. Friend the Minister had absolute powers. It calls on my hon. Friend to

"Ensure that every farmer has an equal opportunity of submitting animals to the scheme; and

Ensure that priority is given to clean beef and infirm cows."

It says:

"The Government must either take responsibilities themselves or appoint an outside body to allocate animals from farms to the abattoir/auctioneers and from the abattoirs to the renderers".

I am sure that my hon. Friend just does not have those powers. I suspect that those powers would be available only in time of war, and I doubt even then.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Does my hon. Friend accept that—I have received this information only in the past 24 hours—there is a bit of a cartel forming between the big abattoirs and the renderers? The big abattoirs are saying to the renderers that if the renderers take cattle from any other abattoir, they will not do business with the renderer again when the scheme is over.

Mr. Harris: Being a man of diplomacy, I might not put that quite as bluntly as my hon. Friend, but I have heard that suggestion. I have also heard another worrying suggestion, on which my hon. Friend the Minister might comment. An auctioneer in my constituency told me at the weekend that people were being assured at market by representatives of certain firms, "Yes, we will ensure that your animals are taken. We can get rid of them; we can dispose of them, but you will have to pay over the odds because we have links with the renderers." If that is true, it is terrible.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton)—indeed, I raised the point in the House on Tuesday—that because of the way in which the scheme operates, there is a danger, if we are not careful, that small and medium-sized abattoirs will be forced out of business altogether and slaughtering capacity will be concentrated in the hands of the large abattoirs—the big boys. That is to be guarded against.

If I can have the attention of the hon. Member for North Cornwall for a second, I think that he would agree that it is unfair to put all the blame, as some have tried to do, on the Government or my hon. Friend the Minister. Many of the difficulties are outside my hon. Friend's control.

Mr. Tyler *rose—*

Mr. Harris: Before I give way, I must say that I could not help but notice that the hon. Member for Glanford and Scunthorpe (Mr. Morley) laughed at what I just said. I find it serious and absolutely disgraceful that not a single Back-Bench Labour Member has attended this debate.

Mr. Tyler: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's support for some of the points that I have made. Are not his constituents, as are mine, concerned that the Government appeared to be not in any way prepared? Of course we do not blame the Minister for everything, but we are entitled to expect that a responsible Government should have foreseen some of the difficulties, particularly in relation to the renderers. There was no contingency plan in place, even after the dress rehearsal of the problem in November. I am sure that he would agree—he put the question to the Minister last week—that we were given no indication that the problem had arisen until 50 days into the crisis.

Mr. Harris: The hon. Gentleman has a marvellous crystal ball into which he can look, which tells him all the difficulties. I repeat what I said earlier. I think that it was very difficult to foresee all the difficulties. Perhaps one could have foreseen some. My hon. Friend the Minister responded to my pleas to have, for example, Helston in Penzance added to the list of markets, and I was delighted about that. Then, as the hon. Member for North Cornwall fairly acknowledged, the renderers said that they would deal only with certain abattoirs. I want Madron Meat added to the list of abattoirs. I doubt whether my hon. Friend the Minister has the powers to take control in the way in which some people seem to suggest he should. So many of the matters are outside his control, which is at the root of much of the problem.

I return to the effect that the crisis is having on all the constituents of those of us who represent farming communities, especially farmers who are virtually dependent on beef production. Others are probably being cushioned. We know that lamb and pork prices in the market have increased. Indeed, the deal for dairy farmers is pretty good because they can probably keep a cow a little longer than otherwise would have been the case.

The crux of the problem is beef producers who have to feed their animals. So many farmers have told me that they will be using up silage to feed the animals because, even though they are out to grass, the grass is coming on slowly due to the dry weather. Those farmers will be dependent on compensation, which is why it is absolutely essential that the backlog is dealt with and the cheques are sent out.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: The hon. Gentleman is making a very important point about the problem and the cost of feeding. Does he agree that it would be helpful—some farmers have made such representation—if we could get agreement from the European Commission for earlier

access to set-aside grazing than September, especially since we have had such a long winter and the grass has not grown?

Mr. Harris: I would support any move that lessens the impact on farmers—there is no doubt that they are in a serious situation. The Government are doing the right thing. Clearly, we must get the cold stores signed up as quickly as possible and we must try to deal with the backlog.

I am sure that the hon. Member for North Cornwall will not give credence to the widespread myth that this crisis came about because the Government lifted regulations. He knows that that is not true, but in his closing remarks he said that someone else had said it. It behoves all of us to be responsible in this situation. It is up to all of us to kick the Minister and to kick the Government to do more to resolve the serious crisis for agriculture and for the rural economy.

The Government have to do more to keep farmers informed of what is happening. I believe that frustration and anger have built up because farmers believe that they are not being kept in the picture about all the difficulties that have arisen. I hope that the debate will go some way to telling people the true position. The farming industry has been remarkably patient about this, but patience is running out—people are desperate, frustrated and angry. It is up to all of us not to inflame the situation and not to play party politics, but to do what we can to help.

8.30 pm

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham): I join my hon. Friend the Member for St. Ives (Mr. Harris) in congratulating my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. The debate has given my hon. Friend the Minister the opportunity to lay out the way that Government believe the scheme should work—and he did so skilfully and clearly. The contributions of Liberal Members showed how ignorant they are of the problems that the Government have had to face in setting up the scheme. If the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) will forgive me, his speech was half an hour of whines and complaints. He did not make one constructive comment nor did he offer a single proposal.

Mr. Tyler: If the hon. Gentleman has not been listening to precisely the same concerns over the last weekend and the past seven weeks, he is not fulfilling his duty to his constituents.

Mr. Atkinson: I have listened to my constituents at great length, as I represent one of the largest beef farming constituencies in the country. Tonight, we have heard half an hour of whines and complaints from the Liberal party, but not one positive suggestion as to how the scheme could be improved. As usual, when it comes to rural matters, Labour Members have been absent during the debate.

Mr. Morley: I have listened to a number of jibes against the Labour party in this regard. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that this is a Liberal Democrat Opposition day. There will be a two-day debate on this and related issues this week. There will be a major vote on Thursday night and the Labour party will be out in force. If the hon. Gentleman shares our concerns about this and other issues, he is more than welcome to join us in that vote on Thursday night.

Mr. Atkinson: I shall certainly be present for the debate, but I doubt that I will find myself in the same Lobby as the hon. Gentleman. The Labour party claims that it represents rural interests. I hope farmers get the Message as to the exact amount of interest Labour members are showing in this matter tonight. Mr. Deputy Speaker, you will note that many Government Members are present in the House—they were here at the beginning of the debate and they are still here. They have found the debate to be worth while and they have shown an interest in being here. No doubt, they will also be here on Wednesday and Thursday.

Mr. Marland: Does my hon. Friend agree with me that the role of the Labour party throughout the entire proceedings has been nothing but to stoke up concern and to throw fat on a small fire to cause as much confusion as possible in the country? In a perverse way, the Labour party is trying to attract attention to itself.

Mr. Atkinson: I agree with my hon. Friend—that is exactly how the Labour party operates. The hon. Member for North Cornwall tried to make villains of two groups.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: The hon. Gentleman should make his speech.

Mr. Atkinson: Liberal Members wasted half an hour with their endless complaints. The hon. Member for North Cornwall sought to make villains of two groups: the renderers and the supermarkets. My hon. Friend the Member for St. Ives has explained the position of renderers—they are there, they have a limited capacity and they cannot conjure more rendering facilities out of the air. Does the hon. Member for North Cornwall want moth balled rendering factories? He said that the Government should have seen this coming. What was my hon. Friend the Minister supposed to do? Was he meant to construct rendering establishments around the country on the basis that they might be needed one day? That is stupid.

The supermarkets are not the villains in this situation either. They are there to serve beef to their customers. If they can sell beef—they are increasingly selling beef to their customers because they say that all their beef is less than 30 months old—that is sensible. The supermarkets are a vital segment of the industry. It is right that my hon. Friend the Minister takes full regard of their views when he sets up the scheme.

My hon. Friend the Minister was right in choosing an industry scheme rather than a scheme laid down by the Government. Those who are aware of the agriculture and meat industry in this country know that every farmer is unique, that every livestock auction mart is unique and that every abattoir is unique, and that they all have ideas as to how the scheme should work. It is right that my hon. Friend sits down with them on a daily basis and gets them to set up the scheme and for the Government to put in the orders to make it work. I congratulate my hon. Friend on doing that.

I congratulate the National Farmers Union, which has been a great help, and the Country Landowners Association. I thank other organisations, such as the Meat and Livestock Commission, for their contributions. An unsung hero in the debate tonight is the intervention board. It has copped an awful lot of flak. It was trying to

[Mr. Atkinson]

put into the detailed scheme something that it had never attempted to do before. I appreciate that it must have had a difficult time setting up the scheme. The board deserves our thanks and the thanks of the farming industry for all that it has done.

I am grateful that my hon. Friend the Minister has added auction marts in my constituency to the list. In particular, I refer to Hexham mart, which is excellent. The important thing about livestock marts is that they are very much a friend and adviser to the farmer, particularly to hill farmers. A lot of farmers live isolated and lonely existences and they find it difficult to keep on top of issues and complications such as we have seen over the BSE issue. The mart is essential to help farmers in remote areas to understand the problems that they face.

Difficulties will arise, and I am sure that they will be drawn to the attention of my hon. Friend the Minister. For example, my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) mentioned abattoirs making threats to individuals. Another problem is the appearance of dealers emerging around the north of England. They say to farmers, "We will take your beasts off you at the live weight price." Apparently, they are reaching an agreement with the abattoirs to sell the beasts at the dead weight price and they are splitting the difference. I do not know whether these rumours are true. If they are true, my hon. Friend should investigate them.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: My hon. Friend has mentioned the important role of cattle marts in this country, particularly in his constituency. Does he believe that there is a discrimination against cattle marts in respect of the live weight and dead weight criteria? Does he believe that some abattoirs are inviting farmers to deal directly with them rather than go through the collection points and cattle marts?

Mr. Atkinson: This is the market ruling, and I believe that in this case my hon. Friend the Minister is trying to achieve a balance between the interests of the livestock mart, of the abattoir and of the farmer. Abattoirs have traditionally and increasingly dealt directly with farmers, so it would be wrong to tell all those farmers that they must go via a livestock mart. However, those farmers with cull cows will obviously be encouraged to go through livestock marts and I suspect that many others will want to, because they will want the livestock mart to organise the transport of their cattle to the abattoir. Those with very few beasts will find it easier to deal with an auction mart—because the beasts can be collected into sensibly sized loads and taken to the abattoir on time—than to deal directly with the abattoir. The scheme will give the abattoir and the livestock mart something, and I hope that it will work.

It is early days yet, but my hon. Friend the Minister will need to start looking to the future. At the moment he has his head down, concentrating on today's problems, but, as we overcome those problems, new problems will arise. There is the prospect of a substantial fall in demand for beef throughout Europe. That will need to be tackled, because otherwise there will be surplus capacity of beef in Europe in the next few years.

Interestingly, the British have been almost the most robust about the beef issue. Our beef consumption fell initially to 60 per cent., but it is now back to 80 to 85 per cent. The Germans, whom some of my hon. Friends like to demonise in this regard, have suffered extremely badly in the sense that, after the first scare of BSE, only 30 per cent. of German beef eaters were still eating beef, and the percentage has only just crawled up to 50 per cent. The Danes, however, are also robust, and scarcely gave up eating any beef throughout the crisis.

Throughout Europe, beef production is scheduled to increase in the next few years, and if beef consumption fell by 20 per cent. and did not recover because of BSE—I fear it is on the cards—we are likely to produce a surplus of about 2 million tonnes of beef in the next few years, which will have to be dealt with by Europe.

Once the immediate crisis is under control, British farmers must carefully consider the future of the beef industry—and, dare I say it, the dairy industry, which will be the next problem on my hon. Friend's agenda.

8.41 pm

Mr. Richard Alexander (Newark): I pay a warm tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and his team. Since this crisis hit the country about seven weeks ago, they have worked tirelessly, night and day, to try to resolve the problem in Europe and in this country. No one could have worked harder.

I wish to place that on the record. I do so especially because, during my few remarks, I shall suggest that one or two things might have been done better. My hon. Friend the Minister of State has gone a long way toward resolving the uncertainty, difficulties and anxieties that our constituents have felt and that we, representing them, have felt for them.

We must accept that, as has been said, we cannot find rendering capacity if it is not there. Yet there has been deep uncertainty in the farming community about how the cattle disposal scheme will work for farmers as individuals.

The crisis has been with us for seven weeks. I had a meeting with senior representatives of the farming industry in my constituency on Friday, and they were still uncertain about how the cattle disposal scheme would work out for them in our county. The letter sent on Friday by my hon. Friend the Minister to them and to us should help, but it would be wrong if we gave the impression that the problems were over and farmers need have no further worries.

From the outset of the proposals, it has been the National Farmers Union's position, which I tend to share, that a better administrative framework or organisation is needed. Farmers need somewhere from which to obtain information and advice. Without accepting the point made by the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) about the 15-year-old child at the end of the telephone—

Mr. Beith: I made the point.

Mr. Alexander: I am sorry. Without accepting that point, made by the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith), I do say that the fact that it happened, although it may not be typical of what is happening throughout the country, shows that the system has not worked as well as it might have done, had someone taken on the organisation of the whole scheme. Farmers tell me that there is no one whom they can go to or ring up with reliability to find out what their position is.

I make that suggestion to my hon. Friend the Minister. He said that he did not want a dirigiste scheme, but something better needed to be done in the past few days.

We should shed a tear for some of the abattoirs that learnt last week that they would no longer be among those listed to be involved in the culling scheme. Two owners of abattoirs visited me on Friday. They had filled in all the forms; they had been inspected. They were told, as of last Friday, that they would be slaughtering 900 cattle a week.

I should say, in parentheses, that one of the problems that farmers in north Nottinghamshire have had—and especially the two abattoir owners, who are also farmers—has been that the letter that my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food told the House on 1 May was being sent to all farmers did not reach them until Friday 10 May. That was the same day on which those two abattoir owners learnt by fax from one of their suppliers that they would no longer be in the scheme. They had had 10 days of uncertainty, and as soon as they received the information, they were told, by an outside source, that they were no longer on the list. I express concern on their behalf at how that happened.

I also express concern at the fact that the list has been reduced to 21. Every abattoir in Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Lincolnshire has been removed from the list. There never was one in Leicestershire. There is no abattoir in the entire east midlands—nothing from Harrogate to Shrewsbury.

Mr. Baldry: This is important language. It is not a question of anyone being removed from the list. Those abattoirs are still designated collection centres, and I have no doubt that, in the very near future, they will be slaughtering under the scheme. As I hope I have explained to the House, to maximise the slaughtering and rendering capacity, it has been possible to use only 21 slaughterhouses at present, but the number will be increased, and I have no doubt that the abattoirs that my hon. Friend mentions will be involved in the scheme as it develops in the next two or three weeks.

Mr. Alexander: That will be very reassuring; I am grateful to my hon. Friend. However, distances are a problem to the people in north Nottinghamshire and the east midlands.

There are other unacceptable consequences of the list being shortened. First, farmers now have to transport their beast much further, at their own expense, than, until Friday, they had believed that they would have to. Secondly, the beast must endure significantly longer journeys, and no farmer or welfarist likes to think that that is being done unnecessarily.

There seems to have been no strategic geographic consideration of where the chosen abattoirs are to be. The entire east midlands does not have one, yet elsewhere there are clusters of several within an approximately 50-mile radius. I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to consider more closely, if he can, where the abattoirs that have been chosen are situated.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: I support my hon. Friend in his remarks. The very large abattoir at Crewe has failed to make the appropriate arrangements with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. It offered to slaughter 200 cattle a day and its employees were prepared to work seven days a week. The Ministry reduced the number initially to 100 and then to 50, at which stage it was pointless for the abattoir to become involved as it was doing that sort of business already with casualty cattle. My hon. Friend makes a very good point: it is important that those abattoirs come on stream if the scheme is to go ahead as quickly as possible.

Mr. Alexander: I shall comment on the way in which the situation has changed unacceptably for farmers, abattoirs and others who received other information initially. My hon. Friend makes a valid point.

I return to a point with which my hon. Friend the Minister of State dealt, but about which I remain uncertain. The system is unfair to producers who have always sold their stock live weight. Producers cannot support the live weight system. For example, a Charollais steer at 650 kg live weight is worth £718.90 and the same steer is worth £862.68 dead weight. That £143.78 shortfall is grossly unfair to the producer and to the auctioneer, who may be having a difficult time, with considerably reduced throughput and much reduced margins of profitability.

The slaughter scheme should not force live weight producers into the hands of the dead weight sector. Live weight markets provide an excellent service, with guaranteed payments on the day of sale. The slaughter sector is not as reliable, with eight or more abattoirs going bankrupt in recent years, owing millions of pounds to producers and to auctioneers. The auctioneers tell me that they do not want to be in the driving seat, but they want a fair system: their clients and their farmer customers should have a real choice in these difficult times. Without that choice, many more markets will shut, causing a dead weight monopoly in many areas. I am sure that no one wants that. Markets are the life-blood of many rural communities; people come to the towns to attend the markets. The market in Newark has the second largest livestock cattle throughput in the country—I make that point to my hon. Friend, because he told us about the cattle market in Banbury. I urge the Government to re-examine the unfairness of the present proposals regarding live weight and dead weight compensation rates, and I urge the Minister to make a change.

The system has changed for the farmer and for the producer in recent weeks, as instanced by the National Farmers Union in its briefing. Initially, the 25p per kilogram live weight top-up was to be paid for the first four weeks of the scheme. That is fair enough—if it had begun. Then it was to be paid during May, but it changed again and was to be paid until 10 June. The top-up will now be paid on all steers and heifers on farms aged more than 30 months as at 20 March. There may be grounds for making those changes, but they have caused great uncertainty within communities that have already suffered badly.

I shall not speak for too long as my colleagues want to contribute to the debate. However, I must refer to another issue in the NFU brief: the financial consequences for farmers. The delays in getting the scheme off the ground—that is what we are debating tonight: not whether Europe is at fault or whether my right hon. and learned Friend could have done things differently—have cost the farmers dear in feeding their animals and servicing their

[Mr. Alexander]

bank loans. Some farmers who deal only in beef have received no income for the past seven weeks. I have referred in the House to a farmer constituent who has a throughput of 5,000 beef cattle a year: he has not sold one animal in seven weeks. Unless the sequence begins to move, the delays will lengthen.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister of State's comments in the House today and in the letter that was sent to our farming constituents last week will lead to a reduction in the backlog. Some 300,000 animals are awaiting disposal, and that number increases by 12,000 per week. Added to that are the 12,000 cows that would usually be culled every week. They are logjammed as well. I do not blame anyone for that situation: I simply seek to illustrate the extent of the problem that our constituents and the country face.

In conclusion, on behalf of the farming community—particularly beef producers—I ask that any future plans and dates be firm and well thought out. They should not be abandoned arbitrarily in any circumstances. Someone must take the scheme by the scruff of the neck and administer it; someone must organise the co-ordinated withdrawal of cattle from the farms. Farmers are sensible people: many of them elect Conservative Members.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Very sensible.

Mr. Alexander: Yes, they are very sensible to do so. They must know where they stand. In responding to the debate this evening, my hon. Friend has done much to give them the reassurance that they seek.

8.57 pm

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): There could have been no more cogent explanation than that by the hon. Member for Newark (Mr. Alexander) of the fact that there is concern, delay, difficulty and confusion arising from the administration of the scheme. That is precisely the motion that we have put before the House. It is nothing extreme—merely a statement that there is a great deal of concern and anxiety in the farming world, which has been hit so badly by the crisis, about the difficulties attendant on the scheme. The hon. Gentleman illustrated them in a practical and sensible way, and the Minister will need to take note of what he said.

The experience has been similar in my constituency. Two weeks ago, the impression was given that only Darlington and Carlisle would serve as mart centres for collection for the county of Northumberland. They are both a great distance from that county, which produces 8.5 per cent. of the national beef herd. That is not bad for one county. Representations have been made by a number of hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson), about the marts in our constituencies. I made representations about Acklington, Wooler and Belford and marts were then added to the list.

It was the beginning of a series of difficulties in a scheme for which farmers had already been waiting for some time. When the new marts were added, further confusion arose as to whether they could begin operation as collection centres before they had been registered through the state veterinary inspection scheme and given a registration number. Two of the marts in my constituency—those at Wooler and Belford—were firmly of the impression that they could not begin operation until they had received a registration number. They and the local vets contacted the intervention board seeking clarification. On Friday, one of the marts found that the only person whom they could contact in the intervention board was a gallant 15-year-old trying to fill the breach—resembling the little Dutch boy putting his finger in the dyke—such was the chaos in the intervention board.

Today, my office spent the entire afternoon trying to get the intervention board to clear up the matter. Eventually, it became clear that registration was not required and the marts could start operating as collection centres immediately. However, somebody with authority should have made that clear to them and they should have obtained that information at the crucial stage. The fact that they were not able to do so further added to the delays and the problems.

We have also faced difficulties resulting from the reduction in supposedly available abattoir capacity, because the renderers are not prepared or able to service anything like the number of abattoirs that were supposed to be available.

The Minister of State said little tonight about the use of cold storage. We want clear assurances that there will be no delay in bringing that cold storage into use and in taking practical steps to ensure that the necessary rendering can take place of carcases that are left in cold storage for a period. Action must be taken and the process set in train without delay.

The hon. Members for Newark and for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), among others, referred to the concern and anxiety about live versus dead weight disposal. I quoted an example showing that the premium on a 700 kg clean beast could be about £200.

Hon. Members have quoted the National Farmers Union brief, but they have been anxious to quote one part of it, and not the rest. The NFU makes it clear that at the

"Beef Management Committee meeting on 26 April . . . the Management Committee rejected the proposals made by the slaughterers and ourselves of using an accurate conversion coefficient for steers and heifers (0.6 as opposed to 0.5 for cows). Accordingly, the scheme encourages farmers to enter all their steers and heifers into the scheme at abattoirs instead of using their normal marketing channels."

That is potentially extremely disruptive, not so much to the large marts at Banbury, in the Minister's constituency, but to the smaller rural marts, which are a key feature of agricultural life in the beef-producing areas, as many of them operate at a much tighter margin than the very large marts to which reference has been made.

It also affects the hauliers profoundly if their regular business is conducted into and out of a particular mart. They may not get business from a farmer who takes his own animals directly to the abattoir. There are also animal welfare problems. If animals are not moved in reasonable quantities, as they would be from the mart to the abattoir, vehicles will be carrying relatively few animals. It is much more difficult to give animals a safe and comfortable journey if there are not many of them in the vehicle than if the vehicle is fully loaded, because there is movement of animals as the vehicle travels along.

What one would hope to achieve in getting the process right is that the normal balance of business between live weight and dead weight is not disrupted in such a way

that, when something like normal conditions return, we shall no longer have the facilities that are so important to the rural areas. Nobody is trying to push the balance between live and dead weight in one direction or the other, but the arrangements will do precisely that. It could be extremely damaging and detrimental to beef-producing areas. Hauliers are already going out of business. Marts could go out of business and they will not be replaced.

The NFU brief fully bears out the concerns that have been expressed. It continues:

"The NFU is dismayed that a combination of delays in decision-making and an underestimate by the Government, in the face of repeated warnings from the NFU, of the practical difficulties involved in establishing fair arrangements for the collection, slaughter and disposal of tens of thousands of cattle a week has caused such a significant delay to the opening of the scheme."

It goes on to refer to the large and growing backlog of cattle on farms and the particular problems resulting from the fact that only 21 abattoirs are currently operating the scheme.

It will not do just to say that the crisis is unprecedented and nobody knows how to handle such schemes. In the old days, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was well accustomed to handling crises of one variety or another. That went right through the war and the post-war years, but in those days the Ministry had an infrastructure of offices designed to administer fairly complex systems. MAFF coped in the past with foot-and-mouth disease and all sorts of other crises. The Ministry is no stranger to putting together arrangements in a hurry, to deal with a crisis that could cause severe damage to the farming industry. It is reasonable to assess performance, even in circumstances as difficult as the present circumstances.

There has been more delay and less information available than there ought to have been, and decisions that are likely to have a disruptive effect have been taken—all that, when the scheme is intended to help the farming industry out of a desperate situation. Ministers must take account of the representations made by hon. Members in all parts of the House tonight, to ensure that the running of the scheme is radically and rapidly improved, so that it brings genuine assistance to a difficult situation in the farming industry.

9.5 pm

Mr. Paul Marland (West Gloucestershire): Gloucestershire has a problem with debates such as this, in respect of the participation of hon. Members representing Gloucestershire constituencies. Two of my hon. Friends are ineligible to speak. I put this on record, for the interest of the local press. My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Knapman) is a Whip, so is unable to speak in these matters, and my hon. Friend the Member for Cirencester and Tewkesbury (Mr. Clifton-Brown) is parliamentary private secretary to my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister, so is not allowed to speak in these matters either. However, I had a brief conversation with my two hon. Friends beforehand and—although they have not heard what I am going to say—they join with some of the remarks that I shall make. I am sorry that the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) is leaving the Chamber, because he was to feature in my remarks later.

I want to mention the Labour party's role in the matter, because it has been absolutely shocking. I said earlier in an intervention that there has been much fanning of the flames, to create concern and anxiety among the citizens of this country. The hon. Member for Peckham (Ms Harman), for example, asked the Secretary of State for the Environment whether he acknowledged

"that public confidence on this issue is hanging by a thread",

and to confirm

"that SEAC members who are parents or grandparents are not giving beef to their children or grandchildren".—[*Official Report*, 20 March 1996; Vol. 274, c. 376-77.]

The hon. Lady had no idea whether or not SEAC members were doing so. That was simply a way of seeking to cause confusion and anxiety among people who had been perfectly happy eating beef beforehand.

There have been no speeches from the Labour Benches.

Mr. Morley *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Marland: Not until now. Perhaps I have provoked Labour's Front-Bench spokesman to say a few words, but there have been no speeches or interruptions from Labour Members. That is a disgraceful performance.

I realise that I am walking on eggshells, but I believe that the press owe all of us something. The press are keen enough to write the bad news about the difficulties faced by the citizens of this country but when the Government are going diligently about their business, seeking to reassure the farmers of this country that something is being done to right a dreadful situation, where are the press? I do not know whether we are allowed to acknowledge the Press Gallery—I know that we are not allowed to acknowledge the Strangers Gallery. The Press Gallery is bereft of reporters.

Mr. Harris: On the day on which I had the honour to sponsor an exhibition Upstairs to mark the 128th anniversary of the coverage of the House by the Press Association, will my hon. Friend take it from me that the Press Association, as always, is represented in the Press Gallery?

Mr. Marland: I realised that I was walking on eggshells, but I did not expect my hon. Friend to put me down in the way that he has.

I was astonished that the hon. Member for North Cornwall had not read the National Farmers Union brief, but obviously the leader of the hon. Gentleman's party did so. On 26 March, the right hon. Gentleman said in Prime Minister's Question Time:

"This morning, the National Farmers Union, which is presumably not hysterical, backed by the entire food industry, which is presumably not hysterical either, has called for older cows to be taken out of the human food chain."—[*Official Report*, 26 March 1996; Vol. 274, c. 832.]

So it is utter nonsense to suggest that the scheme was dreamt up by the Conservative Government. I am very sorry, therefore, that the hon. Gentleman came to the debate so ill prepared. What is more, the hon. and learned Member for Montgomery (Mr. Carlile) did not even know that there were no renderers in Wales. Is theirs a serious political party, or is it some kind of joke? We really do expect better.

Wrestling with BSE takes place in a changing scene. I congratulate Ministers on the actions that they have taken thus far in an extremely difficult situation. They have kept Members of Parliament well informed, and they

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have had to respond quickly as matters have progressed from day to day. It does the Liberal Democrat party no good to quote a week-old article in *Farmers Weekly*. Things have changed a great deal in the past week.

I, too, have made telephone calls to Gloucester market and other interested parties in Gloucestershire. I have been assured by the market this afternoon that the business of gathering cattle is now going smoothly. The slaughterhouse in my constituency commenced slaughtering last week. Of course these operations take a while to get going, but when I spoke to the slaughterer today I was told that the work is going well. The slaughterhouse is experiencing little difficulty sorting out the wretched problem of removing these cows from the herd.

If delays have occurred, that is perfectly understandable; 70 per cent. of the funding for the scheme is coming from Europe, so obviously approaches had to be made to our European partners for their backing.

I also learned today that the supermarkets are not sure whether cattle that are to be rendered can be slaughtered on the same premises as cattle going into the food chain. Discussions on that are therefore taking place; they too will take time to sort out.

In Gloucestershire, clean beef is being given priority because there is a premium on it. My first constructive point for the Minister this evening is to ask whether there is a chance of extending the premium for clean beef over a longer period, so that other cattle can be slaughtered before the clean cattle. As hon. Members have pointed out, many cattle need to be taken out on welfare grounds.

I am delighted also that cold storage is to be used to speed up the slaughter. It is costing farmers thousands of pounds to feed these cattle and they want to get rid of them as quickly as possible. Another affected group, of course, are those who were carrying large stocks of beef before the crisis broke, when the Labour party did so much to scare everyone off eating meat. Many exporters have millions of pounds' worth of stock floating on the high seas and are wondering what to do about it. Will there be any compensation for them?

I am sorry that I do not have time to speak at length this evening, but I believe that we should start to take reprisals against Europe if nothing happens later this week. We should also lay down certain conditions for imports. All meat imported to this country must have specified offal removed, as happens here. All imported meat must be tested for drugs and other illegal substances. And all such meat must have been subjected to the same veterinary inspections at the place of slaughter as we conduct. Lastly, we cannot accept imported meat from animals fed on mammalian compound.

As I say, I am sorry not to be able to speak for longer, but as the Whip is telling me to sit down, I will.

9.13 pm

Mr. Elliot Morley (Glanford and Scunthorpe): The Labour party, and myself on occasions, have been accused of many things, but to be accused by the hon. Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson) of being responsible for the bovine spongiform encephalopathy crisis so that we could attract attention to ourselves is going a bit far. I can tell the hon. Member and others that the Labour party, in 1989, called for ingredients to appear on feed bags; the Labour party, in 1989, called for a proper system of cattle registration so that cattle could be traced back to their holdings; and the Labour party queried the standards of feed renderers and raised the problems of cross-contamination, which—as we have now seen—has been happening for some years and, at least, since 1988 when the ban came in. We in the Labour party do not need anyone to lecture us about the role that we have played in rural areas. We have defended the interests of the farming community and the beef sector since the problem first started. As we know from surveys and opinion polls, the public clearly hold the Government responsible for the crisis. The Labour party does not feature at all in the list of people whom the public hold responsible for the problem, and nor should it.

As I pointed out to the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. Harris), who was not here earlier, there will be a two-day debate on the subject on Wednesday and Thursday. The Labour party will be out in force on that occasion. It is a great shame that the Government are not prepared to accept an amendment so that we could have a genuine debate and we could see from the vote who stands up for the farmers. On the issues of the common agricultural policy and BSE, there will be a vote and we will see who will stand up for the farmers by voting against the motion on Thursday. Hon. Members will have the opportunity to stand up for the farming community, and we will see what happens.

To say that the implementation of the scheme has been in some difficulties is an understatement. The implementation has been described in words such as "shambles" and even the kindest organisations have expressed their dismay about the way in which the scheme has been implemented. In the Labour party, we recognise that the scheme is huge and that there will be problems in implementation. We do not deny or underestimate that, but the Government must recognise the widespread concern about the operation of the scheme and the six weeks it has taken to introduce. Perhaps the Minister might be able to tell us whether any contingency plans were ever drawn up to deal with the problem, which we now face, of potential links, and the implications for human health, between BSE and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease or whether everything has been put in place since the original statement six weeks ago.

The time scale is the key issue. I must disagree with some Conservative Members who said that the problems happened a week ago. That is not the case. Today's *Eastern Daily Press* quotes a farmer as saying:

> "There is no longer a single approved outlet to handle these cull cattle in Norfolk, Suffolk or Cambridgeshire".

That farmer, Mr. Brigham, who farms near Dereham, is also quoted, interestingly, as saying:

> "It really does not inspire confidence. It is no wonder that the rest of Europe is looking at this shambles and that our partners question our ability to handle the crisis".

I shall return to the issue of credibility, but those quotations demonstrate the problems in the east of the country.

There are also problems in other parts of the country. My hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton) has written to us today to express concern at what is happening in his part of the world.

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman: Where is he?

Mr. Morley: He was not able to come here tonight, so I am taking his point up. I hope that the hon. Lady is not trying to trivialise or make a point out of a very serious problem for farmers in Cumbria. My hon. Friend told us that his local slaughterhouse appeared to be on the approved list and it was told to take animals. However, on Saturday 11 May, it was told that the animals it had in store would be removed for rendering by arrangement with the intervention board. The slaughterhouse had come to an arrangement with a renderer in Lancaster and it was also told to continue the work until Tuesday 14 May, when the matter would be reviewed.

The problem is that there is now no collection centre for animals more than 30 months old in Cumbria, even though that slaughterhouse had a casualty animal licence. The collection centre in Ulverston is also concerned that animals collected will have to be transported considerable distances due to the lack of an abattoir in that area. Indeed, the number of slaughterhouses has been reduced because of what appears to be the influence of the rendering industry. The Government must tackle the issue. Concern has been expressed by the farming press, the National Farmers Union, the Country Landowners Association and the British Veterinary Association.

The BVA puts its finger on the issue in the title above its comments, which is "Practice versus Theory". It reports that confusion is rife, with farmers, hauliers, markets and abattoirs all complaining that they do not know what is supposed to be happening. It adds that reports of animals being transported incredibly long distances before slaughter, although anecdotal, must be taken seriously. Indeed, they must, given the problems that have not yet been successfully resolved.

The option of live weight and dead weight concerns many auctioneers. The Opposition believe that the option should be available to farmers. The issue rests with the calculation of compensation, and it is one to which the Government should return to re-examine it. Instead of saying that dead weight should not be an option, the problem of compensation, if there is one, should be reviewed.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: Will the hon. Gentleman comment on the advice that the National Farmers Union has issued by fax today to all its members with fax machines? It has been issued also to cattle markets. The representatives of two cattle markets have expressed considerable sadness to me today that the NFU should encourage traditional farmers who go to a cattle market to take their cattle direct to an abattoir, thus cutting out the cattle market which, in many areas, is a vital part of the rural economy.

Mr. Morley: I accept the hon. Gentleman's genuine concerns. I think that he will accept, however, that many producers have always had a direct relationship with slaughterhouses. The dead weight option was rightly reintroduced by the Government, although at a late stage. There were welfare implications for many animals. The dead weight option means that it is possible to get more animals straight to the slaughterhouses, thus reducing delay. I think that the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) is more concerned about compensation arrangements, which I am sure the Government could reconsider.

The Government should give some thought to beef animals that are generally not marketed until they are over 30 months of age. The Government have said that these animals are under consideration against the background of the European Union. Has any progress been made on exemptions, which would reduce the great pressure that now exists?

Can anything be done to increase rendering capacity? I understand that a business cannot suddenly switch on extra capacity. It will not be able to find the necessary capital, especially if demand will decline or is in decline. It has been made clear, however, that the scheme will run for a considerable time. Renderers, because of the gearing of the scheme, receive much financial advantage. Have the Government discussed with the renderers whether it would be possible to introduce extra capacity within their businesses?

There could be a problem with incineration capacity in dealing with rendered products. Does that mean that some rendered products will go into landfill sites? Is the Minister able to give a categorical assurance that all rendered products will be incinerated?

Beef has been exported and, because of the worldwide ban, it will have to be imported back into the United Kingdom. I do not know whether the Minister knows—I am sure that she has had representations from beef exporters—that South Africa currently has 27,000 tonnes of British beef. That 27,000 tonnes will have to be brought back to the United Kingdom, at the insistence of the South African Government, because of storage problems. How will all that beef—and, indeed, other consignments that are coming back from abroad—be disposed of? Will it be rendered, incinerated or put on the market? The Minister must be aware that some of it will be from animals aged over 30 months, and that putting it on the market would cause difficulties: it would be in breach of the Minister's own rule.

The hon. Lady shakes her head, but I should like clarification of how that beef will be dealt with. It is a real problem for the sector of the beef industry that we are discussing. I appreciate that the problem is caused by a worldwide ban, and I am keen for beef exporters to receive some support. British beef exporters deserve all the support that they can get, and the sector will receive no compensation from the package.

Will the Minister also give some consideration to bull beef producers, whose animals tend to be ready for market at 24 months? It is almost exclusively an export market, and is particularly important in Scotland and parts of Northern Ireland. Will the Minister consider including that category in the 30-month compensation scheme, at the very least until the export ban is lifted? Because there is no market for such beef in the United Kingdom, the producers are likely simply to retain the cattle until they

[Mr. Morley]

reach the age of 30 months and then put them into the 30-month scheme; but they will have to find six months' worth of feed, which they would not have to find in normal circumstances.

It is a pity that some of the suggestions that we made some years ago, which I mentioned in my introductory remarks, were not accepted at the time. I know that action is now being taken, and I believe that the Government are trying to rectify the position by introducing measures to help the consumer and restore consumer confidence, but I must disagree with the hon. Member for St. Ives—who generally speaks thoughtfully about issues such as this—on the question of the Government's responsibility.

The Government introduced the scheme, and they are responsible for it. We have heard tonight that some of the problems are being caused by the rendering sector, but surely the Minister and the Government must have some influence on the operation of that sector, which is insisting on working with only 21 slaughterhouses. Ultimately, they control the purse strings. Ministers cannot escape their responsibility; I suspect that the hon. Member for St. Ives would not disagree with that.

Mr. Brigham said that it would be difficult to persuade the European Union to lift the ban if it appeared that the Government could not implement their own scheme. The Labour party, certainly, feels that credibility is involved here. The Government's credibility has been severely damaged, and it is important to the beef sector—and, indeed, to our economy and exports—for it to be restored as quickly as possible. I hope that Ministers will take account of what has been said today, and ensure that it is acted on—that compensation is paid to farmers as soon as possible, that the problems of delay are resolved as soon as possible and that more capacity is provided as soon as possible, particularly cold-store capacity. That would restore the Government's credibility, and would certainly restore faith in the British beef industry.

9.28 pm

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): We have had an extremely good debate. The hon. Member for Glanford and Scunthorpe (Mr. Morley) should recognise that we are discussing a substantive motion with a substantive amendment, and that a substantive vote can take place at the end of the debate.

The Minister of State, who spoke for 51 minutes, made a good fist of a difficult situation. He gave many detailed answers and explained a number of issues in response to questions from hon. Members on both sides of the House. I commend him for that, but he must still accept that outstanding concerns, some of which were expressed by Conservative Members, remain. The hon. Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson) wasted a certain amount of his speech with gratuitous attacks, but identified one or two important problems.

In replying to the debate, will the Parliamentary Secretary, to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food answer the question that one or two people have raised about whether supermarkets are discriminating against abattoirs? Numerous abattoirs do not wish to be included in the scheme for fear of being tainted with the idea that they are not acceptable for prime beef slaughtering. If that is the case, it is important that we know that it is the case and that the Government take a grip on the position.

The hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. Harris) raised a number of points. He stressed in particular the difficulties that farmers are facing with the high cost of additional feed and the delay in waiting to get their cattle to market, which, for some of them, could be considerably longer yet. In an intervention on the hon. Gentleman—again, I would appreciate it if the Minister dealt with this—I asked whether representations could be made to allow, on a one-off only basis, early access to set-aside land in mid-July instead of in September to take account of the fact not only that we have a problem, but that we have it after a long winter, when there was even less grass than usual for the time of year.

The hon. Member for Newark (Mr. Alexander) was his usual frank and disarming self in dealing with the position in an honest way. He identified the concern about the delay, the continuing shortage of abattoirs in his constituency and the problem of the lack of rendering capacity or of some other means of enabling the process to continue.

The hon. Member for West Gloucestershire (Mr. Marland) again could not resist a few gratuitous attacks, but his comment about the 30-month rule missed the point and his comments quoting my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) did not prove the hon. Gentleman's point. It does not matter, because we are stuck with the position, but the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was suggesting one weekend that the entire British cattle herd might have to be slaughtered. Faced with that or a cull of 30-month-old cattle, which would you choose, Mr. Deputy Speaker? There was also a recognition—numerous people told my colleagues and me this when we visited Brussels—that, if urgent action had been taken at the beginning to put a scheme in place, progress towards a lifting of the ban might already have been made.

The hon. Member for Glanford and Scunthorpe made the only speech from the Labour Benches. It was odd that he had to refer to a letter from one of his hon. Friends when there was plenty of opportunity for a Labour Back-Bench Member to make a speech, but, throughout the debate, not one Labour Back-Bench Member was present. That reflects the arrogance of the Labour party, which is interested in who is moving the motion rather than the substantive issues that it deals with. I give credit to Conservative Members, who have made speeches on behalf of their constituents and whose questions were answered by the Minister. That seems to be the right and constructive response.

I was unable to attend a large part of my Scottish party's conference a few weeks ago in Aberdeen, a week after the ban was imposed, because I was accompanying the noble Lord Lindsay, the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland with responsibility for agriculture, in my constituency in Aberdeenshire. We were seeing for ourselves the scale of the problem. Both of us were shocked by what we saw and by its implications. We visited one farmer who said, "I have 120 head of cattle, which will be going to market in the next two weeks and for which I have already run out of feed. What is going to happen?" That farmer is still facing that problem and still feeding those cattle. No progress has been made towards resolving the problem.

The noble Lord Lindsay and I then visited Donald Russell, a meat company in my constituency. Literally 10 minutes before we arrived, it paid off its entire work force of 34 people because it had no market. That company has developed the top end of the British export market for prime Scottish beef. It had a £10 million turnover and 98 per cent. of its products—80 per cent. of which were beef—were exported. Now that company has no market and no business. It is desperate, and, so far, no measure has come near to giving it any chance of surviving and getting back into the market when the ban is lifted.

Any suggestion that the lifting of the ban is not the most urgent priority is simply unacceptable. We need to get measures agreed, in place and working so that we can persuade our partners to lift the ban as early as possible. That is what we must deliver and it is why people are so concerned about the delay.

I shall give the basic statistics for Scotland. Last year, £120 million-worth of Scottish beef was exported and the industry sustained 21,500 jobs. It is unacceptable, when 21 per cent. of Scotland's beef production is exported, to be told that, in the long run, the export ban might be lifted. It is vital that it is lifted at the earliest opportunity.

I had a letter from a farmer from outside my constituency who has specialised in the export of young bulls, especially to Italy. As he says, it was his choice to concentrate on that market, but now he has been excluded from it and from all compensation measures because he was selling cattle to the Italian market for slaughter at 12 months—a sector for which no assistance is given. He estimates that he will lose between £100,000 and £125,000 this year. There is no help in sight and that is a desperate plight for any farmer.

We must deal with the problem of BSE, and those who pretend that it has come from somewhere else should consider the basic facts. There have been more than 162,500 cases of BSE in the United Kingdom compared with 324 cases in the rest of the world.

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman: What about non-declaration?

Mr. Bruce: The Minister would not support the hon. Lady's contention. She cannot possibly claim that the difference is somehow due to non-declaration and she would be unwise to suggest that there have been no undeclared cases in the United Kingdom. We all know the reality. In the context of Britain and Germany, there may have been some undeclared cases, but there have been 162,500 cases in the United Kingdom and four in Germany. It is not surprising, after a 55 per cent. drop in the home market for German beef, a 40 per cent. drop in France and a 30 per cent. drop in Italy, that there is some concern in those countries. If hon. Members represented constituencies in those countries, they would certainly be calling for action to protect their farmers.

We must deal with the problem and we must persuade people that our measures will lead to the ultimate eradication of BSE in the beef herd. That is the way to get back our own confidence and international confidence and to return to the market with what has been recognised as the best quality beef that people can buy. We can produce it, but we must eradicate this problem, and anybody who diverts his attention from that is not helping British agriculture or British beef production.

I am surprised that, throughout the debate, no hon. Member mentioned the additional, selective slaughter programme. There is no doubt that that must be agreed also if we are to get a final agreement package. Perhaps it might have been better if that had been agreed before we embarked on the major 30-month slaughter programme which is creating such enormous capacity problems. However, we need to get that in place.

A couple of weeks ago, my hon. Friends and I visited the Commission in Brussels to try to establish its view of the situation. The opening position was quite clear: we want to get this ban lifted as early as possible; but for that to be done, we have to have clear proposals on the table that we can recommend to the Council of Ministers; and we have not had them. That was two weeks ago.

On the morning we arrived, the officials received what was described as a "non-paper" from the British Government, with a few "suggestions and ideas". That turned out to be the document that was presented at the Council of Ministers and almost immediately rejected as an apparent British offer on selective culling. When I subsequently saw the document, it did not convince me that it presented a detailed, realistic and thought-through policy. In those circumstances, it is difficult to see how it would have convinced our partners.

I can confirm that the Commission officials to whom we spoke said that they believed that it would be possible to agree a slaughter policy that was effectively targeting the most at-risk cattle, and that the numbers would not be dramatically different from those that we were talking about. An agreement could be struck. We desperately need that agreement to get the ban lifted. I should be grateful if the Minister could tell us in her reply what stage we are at with that agreed policy.

The prime concern in this debate, which has been mentioned in the speeches of hon. Members from both sides of the House, is the situation relating to the 30-month cull and the removal of the older cattle from the food chain. The simple nub of the problem has clearly been acknowledged: blockage and obstruction in the rendering capacity is causing the main problem. Today, I spoke to my contacts in the Scottish industry, and they said that they could slaughter the required amount, but they cannot get them in for rendering.

One small mart in my constituency, Huntley mart, was hoping to get 150 cattle away tomorrow for slaughter, but it has had to cut back that number to 60 and is not sure whether it can manage even those. The right hon. Member for Dumfries (Sir H. Monro) said that we are making progress in Scotland. We are, but it is still a long way short of getting rid of the backlog.

It was pointed out to me that the capacity that was being considered was such that we were still not even building up to a slaughter rate that would achieve a net reduction in the backlog on farms, and that capacity would continue to build up for several weeks before we started to make any real reduction or inroads.

I intervened on the Minister's speech to make a specific point, which I do not think he fully appreciated—I do not blame him for that. The point, which was made to me, is that, because cattle have been kept and fed on farms for extra weeks and months, they have put on extra fat. It is therefore more appropriate to talk not about how many beasts can be processed through the rendering but about the tonnage. The problem is that the Minister may be

[Mr. Bruce]

miscalculating on those figures to his disadvantage. I say that as a constructive issue that must be dealt with so that we can find the capacity.

If we cannot conduct the rendering process, it seems to be clear that we shall need to increase incineration capacity and storage capacity. Until we can get up to a full slaughtering level that is clearly reducing the backlog on farms, we shall satisfy neither our home producers nor those in Europe who need to be persuaded that we have this issue under control. I think that that is fundamentally why there is so much concern in the country.

The Minister made it clear that his view was that this is a very difficult situation, that it is much more complicated than anything that Ministries have had to deal with before and that we really should understand that he is working extraordinarily well with his officials to get this far. I am sure that the situation is difficult—I am not suggesting that it is not nor belittling it. It is very difficult being a farmer out there, or a meat producer who is trying to sell processed meat without any cash flow, outlook or movement in the market. Most people are saying that seven weeks is too long.

How much longer before we can see a real shift in the market? Effectively, farmers are being told that they have to put their cattle in a raffle. If they are lucky and their number comes up in it, the cattle be designated to go to slaughter. Some of them are now being told that their raffle will not be drawn for six and a half weeks from today. They will not even enter the raffle for another six and a half weeks because all the allocated space has already been taken up by what went in in the first week.

The Minister must understand that farmers are saying such things. When market managers and abattoir managers are having to cope with such comments, it is no wonder that people feel extremely stressed and distressed and inevitably see that there is a need for firm action.

It was interesting that one or two Conservative Members said that what was needed was someone to take control of the situation. It was not quite clear what they had in mind but, to judge from the Conservatives' record, I suppose that it would be a firm of management consultants or something similar. Ultimately, however, the Government must take control—they are in the hot seat. If they need to bring in extra help from outside they should do so, from whatever source is necessary.

It is not unreasonable for farmers, meat producers, abattoir owners, haulage contractors and everyone in the beef trade to say that, whether or not it is the Government's fault, they ultimately require the Government to deliver the goods that will get them out of this mess. People in the industry want the scheme to be working so that they can see the backlog being reduced, and they want it agreed with our European colleagues that what we are doing is enough to persuade them that the ban should be lifted at the earliest opportunity. That being the case, I draw the Minister's attention to two comments.

First, the Minister of State mentioned the Country Landowners Association, which has given the Government credit for measures that have been put in place but still expresses frustration about the situation. In particular, it says:

"The CLA has supported the Government in seeking the removal of the EU ban but not at any price. The UK's effort to persuade other member state Governments, apart from the legal challenge in the European Court of Justice, must be based on explanation of the comprehensive and effective range of measures adopted within the UK."

That is now urgent.

Secondly, this is not simply special constituency pleading although, as I represent Gordon in Aberdeenshire, I probably represent the biggest concentration of beef producers, from primary to end product. We have set up a north-east Scotland red meat industry task force which represents all parts of the industry. On Friday, the organisation sent a letter to the Secretary of State for Scotland, the first page of which states that it had already written to him on 1 May and to Lord Lindsay on 12 April and was disappointed not to have received a reply to either of those letters.

The organisation said specifically that, given the importance of ensuring that the system is not abused, it is generally recognised that we have to be extremely firm and must prosecute anyone found guilty of abusing it. It would like to know who will be policing the rendering plants which, it feels, are not subject to the same tight inspections as abattoirs. It is also concerned about people who have fallen through the compensation net—I have mentioned a few of them already—and for whom no measures have been introduced but who, week by week, are getting closer to bankruptcy and liquidation. They are the very people—at the top end of the market—whom we shall need to lead Britain back into the export market when the ban is lifted, but they will not be there if we do not give them adequate support now.

We are speaking on behalf of tens of thousands of people in the industry throughout Scotland, England and Wales and, indeed, Northern Ireland. We want the Government to get the culling and slaughtering scheme fully operational and for it to be fully agreed with our European partners, and the sooner the better. In those circumstances, despite the Minister making a good fist of a difficult situation, the Government amendment to the motion is not good enough. People are not satisfied with the progress made so far—they should not be, and nor should the Government.

9.47 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mrs. Angela Browning): This subject concerns many hon. Members, especially those of us who represent farming communities because we are aware of the seriousness of the bovine spongiform encephalopathy/Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease crisis which has hit not only the farming industry but allied industries.

It is a matter of regret, however, that the subject should come again to the Floor of the House in the form of the Liberal Democrat motion. The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) began his address by saying that the Liberal Democrats had refused to indulge in recriminations but went on to give a long list of recriminations. That is not uncharacteristic because it has been the tenor of his party's behaviour on this subject to speak in the Chamber in a statesmanlike way in a spirit of co-operation and to recognise the seriousness of the issue to the industry but, whenever its members had the opportunity to get in front of a microphone, to behave quite differently.

On the very day that the announcement was made, I took part in a BBC South-West television interview with the hon. Member for North Cornwall, who was down the line in the south-west. He questioned the very fact that the Government had made the announcement in the House. If we had hidden it from the House or the country, he would have been the first on his feet to complain about it.

Mr. Nick Harvey (North Devon): That is not true.

Mrs. Browning: I am just about to quote the hon. Member for North Cornwall, so the hon. Gentleman can decide whether it is true. In the *Financial Times* on 25 March—the hon. Gentleman can check it—the hon. Member for North Cornwall said:

"Ministers must now really state in unequivocal terms which beef products are entirely safe and which may carry some risk, however remote."

That is hardly the judgment of somebody who had accepted what SEAC had said. He was putting question marks over the safety of products. In the *Western Morning News* on 23 March, he said:

"Farmers are very very angry because Ministers have allowed confusion to reign by talking about the risk of beef instead of identifying that it was bovine products."

Bovine products and beef were not a risk. The SEAC recommendations were very clear. Quite what the hon. Gentleman thought that he was doing in stirring the pot in that way, I do not know. It is very strange.

Only recently, the hon. Member for North Cornwall said that the delay in the 30-month scheme was due to lack of staff in the Meat Hygiene Service, which is totally untrue. Even though my hon. Friend the Minister of State explained the matter very clearly, the hon. Gentleman said in the House today that the 30-month scheme was not wanted by the industry and that the Government had dreamed it up to present to the country.

In his speech, the hon. Gentleman even quoted the Booker column of Sunday 12 May, to which he added his support. It described the 30-month scheme as "illegal", a "crackpot scheme" and

"a plan for which there is not the slightest rational justification".

Frankly, if that is the view of the hon. Gentleman and his party of the 30-month scheme, what they have said for the past three hours has hardly been worth listening to.

Mr. Tyler: Obviously, I cannot answer all those stupid remarks in one quick intervention, but I can suggest how stupid they are by saying that the hon. Lady has not even cited the right article. I was referring to *The Daily Telegraph*, not *The Sunday Telegraph*. She has got the wrong quotation.

Mrs. Browning: If they are stupid remarks, they are also the hon. Gentleman's words—QED.

There have been some more serious speeches in this debate, especially that of my hon. Friend the Member for St. Ives (Mr. Harris), who is well respected and, as a Cornish Member of Parliament, knows the farming community. He summed up the complexity of the scheme and endorsed the points that my hon. Friend the Minister made, when he outlined clearly the way in which the scheme has developed.

My hon. Friend the Member for St. Ives not only described the scheme'scomplexity but said that one of the reasons why there was some delay was that we listened to what the farming community wanted. We adjusted the scheme, added the extra money for the clean beef scheme and added the dead weight scheme at the specific request of the farming community. Obviously, such things could not be decided on the day that the proposal was announced. We had to go through the usual channels, talk to Brussels and get it agreed in such forums as the Beef Management Committee before we could assure the House that we would be able to run the scheme.

My hon. Friend the Member for St. Ives also talked about keeping farmers informed. We appreciate the need to keep individual farmers informed. My hon. Friend the Minister has already described the steps that we have taken to inform farmers—personally, by direct mailing—and slaughterhouses and livestock markets. I assure my hon. Friend the Member for St. Ives and other hon. Members who have raised this issue that the Government are conscious of the need for information as things have changed quite quickly. We shall continue to ensure that we inform people of any changes as quickly as possible.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson) raised the importance of the livestock markets and the role of the supermarkets in this matter. Very early in the crisis, the supermarkets said that they would continue to sell British beef. I pay tribute to them—unlike others who decided not to sell British beef—as they have been robust in promoting it. Supermarkets said that they would sell beef that was less than two and a half years old, which is why they have been supportive of the 30-month scheme.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Mr. Alexander) referred to the difficulties that people in his constituency have experienced. I reiterate the point made by my hon. Friend the Minister of State: while we can share the frustration of, for example, the abattoirs that are listed but that are not yet fully operational, it is a matter of the rendering capacity being able to meet what the slaughterhouse industry can deliver and a matter of it being able to process it.

That is why my hon. Friend the Minister told hon. Members that we will progress, as quickly as possible, with a scheme for cold storage so that more animals can come through the abattoirs and be slaughtered and so that the farmers can receive their cheques as quickly as possible. We hope to put that into place soon. Many of the abattoirs that hon. Members have mentioned will be able to move the animals through and that will speed up the process.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): Will the Minister also look at the possibility of using the Government's influence with the intervention board? Some of the figures from the recent tranches of intervention have been quite disappointing in terms of the amount of beef that has been taken out of the United Kingdom market.

Mrs. Browning: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. As hon. Members will know, we have negotiated opening more boxes with Europe—in fact, we are happy to look at that again. The hon. Gentleman will understand that this is a Europe-wide scheme and in the bids that go forward on a fortnightly basis the United Kingdom has not

[Mrs. Browning]

always done well—ironically, bids from other countries sometimes do a little better. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we are aware of that and we will keep an eye on it. It is important, and a number of hon. Members have mentioned the difficulty with young bulls.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Gloucestershire (Mr. Marland) outlined the positive side of what is being done. He gave a good summary of the weakness of the argument of the Liberal Democrats this evening. Many of the measures that have already been announced and those that are coming forward show that this issue will not be with us for a short period of time. As hon. Members know, we are looking at the long term. For example, we hope to introduce the mature beef scheme as quickly as possible.

We are currently consulting in this regard, and the consultation period is only two weeks. I had two meetings with industry representatives prior to the consultation document being issued. We hope that the mature beef scheme—which will affect animals that are more than two and a half years old—will be the forerunner for a wider scheme. It would be impossible to launch a scheme that is too wide to begin with; it will need to be narrow. I hope to get it up and running by June.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce *indicated dissent.*

Mrs. Browning: If we are to reassure the public and Europe—which the hon. Gentleman has mentioned several times this evening—it is important that we have in place a scheme where we can certify herds and put in place documentation tags and other systems that will ensure that no one can point the finger and say that there are weaknesses in it. If the hon. Gentleman wants us to take a scheme off the shelf and introduce it next week, we could do it, but it would not be in the interests of the industry.

Mr. Bruce: The hon. Lady must acknowledge that the specialist herd is a small proportion. I refer to the selective slaughter agreement. We should get an agreement on it so that we can get the ban lifted from all beef.

Mrs. Browning: I was very interested to hear what the hon. Gentleman and his friends said in Brussels. The selective slaughter policy is primarily a selective scheme to take out those cohorts of animals that have been fed infected feed at the same time on the same farm as animals that have suffered from BSE. The hon. Gentleman denigrated that policy and dismissed it, and he criticised the Government when that proposal was first presented to Brussels, scathingly calling it a "non-paper".

I have to tell the hon. Gentleman that any more slaughter of any kind must pass the test of being approved by the industry in this country and by the Members of the House before it is presented to Brussels. That is the scheme that is on the table in Brussels. At the moment, our European partners have said no; they want more herds and animals killed. If the hon. Gentleman is supporting that, he had better say how many more animals he wants killed.

Mr. Kirkwood: *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put accordingly, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 62, Noes 124.

Division No. 126] **[10.00 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Alton, David
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Barnes, Harry
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Brown, N *(N'c'tle upon Tyne E)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Callaghan, Jim
Campbell, Menzies *(Fife NE)*
Carlile, Alexander *(Montgomery)*
Chidgey, David
Clark, Dr David *(South Shields)*
Coffey, Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John
Dafis, Cynog
Davies, Chris *(L'Boro & S'worth)*
Dewar, Donald
Dixon, Don
Dobson, Frank
Eastham, Ken
Etherington, Bill
Evans, John *(St Helens N)*
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Godman, Dr Norman A
Golding, Mrs Llin
Harvey, Nick
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark)*
Janner, Greville
Jones, Barry *(Alyn and D'side)*
Jones, Lynne *(B'ham S O)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keen, Alan
Kilfoyle, Peter
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lynne, Ms Liz
Maclennan, Robert
Maddock, Diana
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morley, Elliot
Mudie, George
Nicholson, Emma *(Devon West)*
Pike, Peter L
Raynsford, Nick
Rendel, David
Salmond, Alex
Skinner, Dennis
Spearing, Nigel
Steel, Rt Hon Sir David
Strang, Dr. Gavin
Taylor, Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Tipping, Paddy
Tyler, Paul
Wallace, James
Welsh, Andrew
Wigley, Dafydd

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Archy Kirkwood and
Mr. Don Foster.

NOES

Alexander, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arnold, Jacques *(Gravesham)*
Ashby, David
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Nicholas *(North Dorset)*
Baldry, Tony
Bates, Michael
Biffen, Rt Hon John
Bonsor, Sir Nicholas
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Eltham)*
Bowis, John
Brandreth, Gyles
Brazier, Julian
Bright, Sir Graham
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Budgen, Nicholas
Burns, Simon
Burt, Alistair
Butcher, John
Butler, Peter
Carlisle, Sir Kenneth *(Lincoln)*
Carrington, Matthew
Carttiss, Michael
Chapman, Sir Sydney
Churchill, Mr
Clappison, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coombs, Simon *(Swindon)*
Couchman, James
Currie, Mrs Edwina *(S D'by'lre)*
Devlin, Tim
Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James
Dover, Den
Elletson, Harold
Evans, David *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Evans, Jonathan *(Brecon)*
Evans, Nigel *(Ribble Valley)*
Evennett, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fenner, Dame Peggy
Fishburn, Dudley
Forman, Nigel
Fox, Dr Liam *(Woodspring)*
Fox, Rt Hon Sir Marcus *(Shipley)*
French, Douglas
Gallie, Phil
Gillan, Cheryl
Goodson-Wickes, Dr Charles
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorst, Sir John
Greenway, Harry *(Ealing N)*
Greenway, John *(Ryedale)*
Griffiths, Peter *(Portsmouth, N)*
Harris, David
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver

Hendry, Charles
Hughes, Robert G *(Harrow W)*
Hunt, Rt Hon David *(Wirral W)*
Kellett-Bowman, Dame Elaine
King, Rt Hon Tom
Kirkhope, Timothy
Knapman, Roger
Knight, Mrs Angela *(Erewash)*
Knight, Rt Hon Greg *(Derby N)*
Knight, Dame Jill *(Bir'm E'st'n)*
Lang, Rt Hon Ian
Lawrence, Sir Ivan
Legg, Barry
Lidington, David
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacKay, Andrew
Maitland, Lady Olga
Malone, Gerald
Marland, Paul
Martin, David *(Portsmouth S)*
Merchant, Piers
Mitchell, Andrew *(Gedling)*
Nelson, Anthony
Neubert, Sir Michael
Nicholls, Patrick
Oppenheim, Phillip
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Pattie, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Pickles, Eric
Porter, David *(Waveney)*
Rathbone, Tim
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Roberts, Rt Hon Sir Wyn
Robinson, Mark *(Somerton)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Mid Kent)*
Shaw, David *(Dover)*
Skeet, Sir Trevor
Smith, Tim *(Beaconsfield)*
Spencer, Sir Derek
Spink, Dr Robert
Stephen, Michael
Stern, Michael
Streeter, Gary
Sweeney, Walter
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomason, Roy
Thompson, Patrick *(Norwich N)*
Thornton, Sir Malcolm
Townsend, Cyril D *(Bexl'yh'th)*
Tredinnick, David
Twinn, Dr Ian
Viggers, Peter
Walden, George
Walker, Bill *(N Tayside)*
Waller, Gary
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Ray
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Ann
Wilkinson, John
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macc'fld)*
Wolfson, Mark

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Timothy Wood and
Mr. Patrick McLoughlin.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 30 (Questions on amendments), and agreed to.*

MADAM SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the Government's commitment to restoring consumer confidence in the UK beef industry by introducing a slaughter scheme for cattle over the age of 30 months; notes the progress made in the 30-month scheme; recognises the dependence of the scheme on co-operation between farmers, auctioneers, slaughterers and renderers and welcomes the steps taken to foster such co-operation to ensure that the maximum slaughter rates are achieved.

SITTINGS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 22,

That this House, at its rising on Wednesday 22nd May, do adjourn till Tuesday 4th June.—*[Mr. Streeter.]*

Question agreed to.

HOME AFFAIRS

Ordered,

That Mr. Peter Butler be discharged from the Home Affairs Committee and Mr. Warren Hawksley be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. MacKay.]*

School Security

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Streeter.]*

10.12 pm

Mr. Greville Janner (Leicester, West): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise in the House the horrendous problem of security in our schools. I have campaigned for many years and begged the Government to make available adequate resources for schools to provide security measures. They need these to counter the attacks made upon them, often daily, and to provide not only replacements for the goods and buildings that are destroyed but, more important, adequate security measures that do not have to be funded from schools' inadequate budgets.

There are 43 schools in my constituency and in the past financial year no fewer than 41 of them have been attacked by vandals, arsonists and burglars—many of them on several occasions. The cost of putting right the damage caused is estimated at more than £315,000.

In Leicestershire, the figures for arson have multiplied by six since the Government came to power. In 1979, there were about a dozen arson attacks on public buildings, including schools. In the past year, there were 72 such attacks. Schools and other public buildings are suffering from vandalism, burglary and other crime. Schools are forced to spend on security from budgets that should be used for teaching, for books and for other equipment because no adequate moneys are available to cover the cost of installing the preventive measures needed.

Despite the difficulty of obtaining figures, research undertaken for me by Pallavi Sharma and Tom Playfoot shows that secondary schools in my constituency fall into two categories. Schools in the first category have no private insurance and must pay 70 per cent. of the cost of repairs and replacements. Primary and special schools must pay 55 per cent. The second category is schools that participate in a private insurance scheme. They must pay 20 per cent. of the premium, with an excess of 70 per cent. for secondary schools and 55 per cent. for primary and special schools. They should have to pay nothing. There is no reason why schools should be forced to meet from their budgets the costs resulting from vandalism, burglary and arson.

Many schools in the most disadvantaged and vulnerable areas cannot even obtain insurance because the premiums are too high. They are left totally uninsured.

Schools that want to install closed circuit television, security fencing, alarm systems and locks must, in most cases, meet the whole cost themselves, or at least a substantial part of it. I ask the Government to pay the full amount from whatever budget may be available. If no budget is available, I ask the Government to make such funding a priority.

We are not talking primarily of awful tragedies such as the shootings in Dunblane—although that incident has thrown the whole problem into stark relief. We are talking about the everyday miseries of ordinary schools in my constituency and throughout the country. I have tried to obtain details of the cost, without success. The Department for Education and Employment says that

[Mr. Greville Janner]

such figures are not available. I give notice to the Minister that I shall be tabling a series of written questions to force the figures out of the Government. There is no reason why all local education authorities should not produce such figures, in the same way that Leicestershire has done for me.

Schools must compete with public buildings for a limited budget. Only four schools in my constituency received council moneys for security, and each school had to pay half from their own budget. In the past two years, Leicestershire education committee—starved of funds by Government measures—has received no money for school security. That is wrong. Schools should have proper security. Of course it is sad that such measures are necessary. We would all much prefer them not to be necessary. The reality is that with the cracking of the social system, the growth of deprivation and the causes of crime left unattended, schools must take security measures.

I certainly hope, after Dunblane, that the time will come when the Government ban handguns in people's homes, but that will not be enough. The smashing of schools and equipment, the stealing of equipment and the burning of schools cannot be dealt with by banning guns.

I offer the House a few examples. Barleycroft county primary school, an excellent school in my constituency, has a first-class head teacher, Philip Goulding, who at the age of 43 was attacked by five or six youths at the end of last year after he had caught one of them who had stolen a mobile phone from a car. He needed 16 stitches, he had a broken nose, cuts above both eyes, a trapped nerve and head and neck injuries. Over the past four years his school has had to spend £20,000 of its education budget on security measures. That is disgraceful; it should not be permitted.

There is an excellent special school with a brilliant head teacher, Rufus Gordon, whom I have known for many years. He wrote to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment on 29 January as follows:

"In the past three years I have lost my Science Teacher and was not allowed to replace her due to financial restrictions."

That in itself is shocking enough.

"I have made my Deputy redundant, my Senior Mistress and Junior Teacher redundant, my Home Economics Teacher redundant, and my Languages and Support Teacher redundant. I have made Nursery Nurses redundant and Ancillary. I depend on hourly-paid teachers to stay afloat—that is, to cover the National Curriculum . . . There is no one else I can make redundant . . . There is no way we can maintain the payments on the closed circuit television—I have had to stop, in any case, paying our Premises Officer to come in on Saturday and Sunday to replace the video tape in the CCTV, as that was costing me £30 each weekend",

which the school has not got.

I hope that the Minister, too, is shocked by this. I hope that she understands the outrage among teachers in my constituency and will now at last provide the money to cover these costs.

I have a soft spot for special schools such as the Western Park school and the Emily Forte school, which was set ablaze a short time ago. But I hope that the money for security will be forthcoming for all the schools in my constituency, not just these two.

With all these miseries besetting our schools, what do the Government intend to do? I pay tribute to the Secretary of State who was kind enough to come to my constituency at my invitation and meet teachers and head teachers, but nothing has happened since. The nearest to anything happening has been the preparation of a report which, by the sort of amazing coincidence for which this House is renowned, is due to appear tomorrow. The Secretary of State has been kind enough to provide me with a copy of it, but I cannot refer to it in this debate. I hope, Madam Speaker, to raise the matter as a point of order, because it is wrong, when there is a forthcoming Adjournment debate on a particular subject, to issue a written answer to a parliamentary question the next day so that there is no chance to debate it.

I hope that the report will be favourable to my views and that it will accept what is patently obvious to everyone but the Government: that schools, teachers and pupils are suffering because there are no adequate security arrangements that schools can make without cutting into their budgets.

It is not enough simply to issue a report. As Chairman of a Select Committee I have seen many reports issued, pigeonholed, commented on and then die the death. That will not do in this case. If it turns out that the report agrees with me, I hope that the Minister will undertake tonight immediately to implement measures to end this awful situation.

We all know how much the schools are suffering, but I wonder whether the Government understand that the greater the disadvantage in an area, the greater the suffering for the school. If there is vandalism, burglary or arson at a school in a well-off area, the teachers can bring together parents who can, and do, chip in and help the school to replace the losses and, often, to put in security measures. I appeal to the Under-Secretary on behalf of the disadvantaged schools, in areas where the parents do not have the money to do that and, much as they would wish to, cannot help. I appeal to the Under-Secretary on behalf of areas with broken homes and broken schools, where there is vandalism, arson and burglary and where the police, even with the few extra who will be put on—that is all it will be—cannot hope to cope.

I know that I speak with the full backing of the teachers, the parents and the Leicestershire police, who are under great strain. I beg the Under-Secretary to understand that the teachers want to teach and they want the resources to teach. The letter that I have read out to her from the Western Park school shows a state of affairs that should not be allowed to exist in a civilised country—certainly not in one in which the funds could be made available if the Government wished to do so. I hope that the Government will now give security in schools proper priority and that the Under-Secretary will produce for us tonight a constructive reply to a plea that is made in the greatest of good faith, on behalf of people who badly need the help that only the Government can provide.

10.26 pm

Mr. Keith Vaz (Leicester, East): It is typical of the generosity of my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Leicester, West (Mr. Janner) to offer his Leicester

colleagues the chance to make a brief contribution to the debate. I wish to pay tribute to him for the way in which he has championed this cause. I first met my hon. and learned Friend 20 years ago, when I was a student with his son at university. I came to the House at his invitation to have a look at the proceedings. I knew then of his reputation for fighting hard on behalf of his constituents, and tonight we have seen a tour de force and an example of the passion and the commitment that he gives to his constituents of Leicester, West. He will be missed after the next election, because, as the House knows, he has announced his retirement.

My hon. and learned Friend has raised a crucial issue and he has put forward, in the most eloquent and passionate terms, the concern of teachers, parents and ordinary citizens about vandalism in schools in Leicestershire. I do not want the House to think that such incidents happen only in Leicestershire. Of course, it is a national problem, and my hon. and learned Friend has merely highlighted it on a local basis.

I wish to add my voice to my hon. and learned Friend's and to stress the need for the Under-Secretary to come up with firm proposals in her reply. I, too, would like to know what is in the report that the Secretary of State will publish tomorrow. I hope that the Minister has seen a copy; my hon. and learned Friend said that he had seen a copy. It is vital that we do not just get promises and warm words, but that we have some positive action to ensure that schools are supported. As my hon. and learned Friend said, they suffer greatly because of the cuts in budgets that they have had to endure after 17 years of the Government.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mrs. Cheryl Gillan) *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Vaz: It is no good the Under-Secretary shaking her head. It is true that the schools are suffering because of the high rate of crime, which has doubled since the Conservatives have been in office.

I have just had a conversation with Mr. Jones, who is a teacher at Charles Keane college. My hon. and learned Friend knows it well, because people from both our constituencies attend it. Mr. Jones told me that last night there was a burglary at Charles Keane college. The burglars stole the telephone keyboard, which is essential to the functioning of the school, which will have to replace it out of its budget.

We want some action from the Under-Secretary and a positive response to the excellent campaign led by my hon. and learned Friend.

10.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mrs. Cheryl Gillan): I congratulate the hon. and learned Member for Leicester, West (Mr. Janner) on securing an Adjournment debate on such an important subject. I am sad to hear that he has announced his retirement. I am sure that the House will be a poorer place without him. The hon. and learned Gentleman is renowned, most notably for his buttonholes. I note that he is not wearing one tonight. I hope that that is not the result of anything that I have done.

The hon. and learned Gentleman shares a concern about security in schools with many other Members. I am pleased that he allowed his hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) to contribute to the debate. The hon. and learned Gentleman and the hon. Gentleman join many colleagues throughout the House, including my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan), the Secretary of State for Health, my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Mr. Dorrell), my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Ashby) and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier), to name but a few in the area around the hon. and learned Gentleman's constituency who are interested also in school security; as, indeed, we all are.

As the hon. and learned Gentleman rightly said, the timing of tonight's debate is both fortuitous, in the sense that the report of the working group on school security is to be published tomorrow, and unfortunate because, of course, I cannot tonight give more than a flavour of the group's recommendations. A flavour, however, I shall give at this stage. I do not think that the hon. and learned Gentleman has too long to wait. Indeed, given the late hour, it will not be long at all before the report is published. I hope that the hon. and learned Gentleman's curiosity will be fully satisfied.

School security is a problem that concerns us all, as parents, as members of the local community and certainly as politicians. Vandalism and arson damage the fabric of schools, the morale of their staff and pupils and the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

The Government are entirely at one with the hon. and learned Gentleman in our concern for schools suffering from such crimes. He kindly referred to the visit of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to Braunstone Hall school in Leicester last year, to discuss school security matters with local head teachers. In a recent exchange with the hon. and learned Gentleman, I expressed my great sadness over the arson attack faced by Emily Forte school in his constituency. It was a great sadness and I reiterate my remarks on that earlier occasion.

I know also that the hon. and learned Gentleman and the rest of the House shared the country's shock and grief at the recent tragic events at St. George's school in Maida Vale and at Dunblane. Those events were all the more horrific because of the traditional place of schools at the heart of their communities. Schools naturally want to be open and welcoming to pupils, to parents and to the local community. They are often centres for wider education and leisure activity locally. They seek to be encouraging of education generally, and to draw parents and the community into supporting the education of local children. Those characteristics benefit and enrich our villages, towns and cities. They should be valued and protected.

Nevertheless, it is natural that recent events should have raised questions about whether that accessibility exacts too high a price; whether schools now need to secure themselves more rigorously against threats from outside.

Despite the emotional impact of the incidents that we are discussing, there is general agreement that attempting to turn schools into fortresses is not the right response. There is a need to strike a balance between

[Mrs. Cheryl Gillan]

access and security. It is to the credit of heads, teachers and school governors throughout the country that they are determined to avoid a siege mentality. Such determination should be applauded and supported.

That response should not be taken as an excuse for inaction. It is clear that there are limits to what can sensibly be done to prevent events as extreme as the horrific killings in Dunblane, but there are effective and practical measures that can be taken to protect staff, pupils and premises, without turning schools into fortresses.

I have already referred to the working group on school security, which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State established immediately following the fatal stabbing of head teacher Philip Lawrence. In the wake of his tragic death, its remit was to consider what more should be done to help to ensure that schools are safe places for their staff and pupils.

The group brought together representatives of all the main interests in school security: head teacher, teacher and support staff associations; school governors; voluntary aided, grant-maintained and independent schools; local education authorities; parents; the police; and Government Departments. We are immensely grateful to the group's members for their efforts in drawing up the report so quickly and with such care. I am sure that the hon. and learned Gentleman will read it with interest, as it bears on much that has been said tonight—if, indeed, he has not already had a sneak read earlier.

Without wanting to pre-empt the detailed recommendations, I can confirm that the group has made a range of positive and practical suggestions, covering issues such as the role of governors, local education authorities and school staff in maintaining and improving security; the availability of advice and guidance on security-related matters to schools and others with an interest; the law relating to troublemakers in and around schools; and funding for security improvements. The Government's response will be in equally positive vein: indeed, we have already acted on early recommendations from the group.

First, we have taken firm action to counter the menace of people carrying knives and other weapons in schools. The Offensive Weapons Bill, which is currently before Parliament—promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Lady Olga Maitland)—has been amended: it now makes it an offence to carry a knife or other offensive weapon on school premises, and we are extending to those premises police powers of search for such weapons. The press has focused on the application of the measure to pupils, but it is at least as much concerned with weapons carried by intruders.

Secondly, following recent consultation, we are adding school security to the list of items on which school governors must report annually to parents. That will help to highlight and reinforce the important role of governors in maintaining and improving security in their schools. I have already mentioned that the school security working group has considered funding matters. There are already sources of funds that could, depending on LEAs' and schools' priorities, be used to pay for improved security. LEAs receive formula capital allocations for improvement and replacement work in county and voluntary controlled schools; equivalent support for grant-maintained schools is channelled through capital formula allocations from the Funding Agency for Schools for England. Voluntary aided schools can receive support through the minor works programme and the voluntary rationing scheme.

In the current year, the schools renewal challenge fund will provide the bulk of central Government capital funding for improvement and refurbishment of LEA and voluntary aided schools. The criteria for the scheme, published last week, indicate that projects that include measures to improve the security of school premises will be particularly welcome. Schools have also been able to bid to the Home Office for funds from the closed circuit television challenge competition, worth £15 million in the current financial year. The working group has taken all those existing sources into account in considering its funding recommendations.

The hon. and learned Gentleman has argued vigorously that the current arrangements are not adequate, and that funds should be allocated specifically to improving school security. I believe that, when he sees our response to the group's report, he will be reassured about the Government's determination to play their proper part in supporting action to improve school security.

Mr. Janner: I appreciate what the Minister has said very much. Can she give an indication of when the Government will respond to the report's recommendations?

Mrs. Gillan: The hon. and learned Gentleman is jumping the gun. I have said that we are publishing the report tomorrow, and that I believe that he will join us in welcoming the Government's response. He can press me, but I am afraid that he will get no further tonight: he will have to wait until tomorrow.

The report is not, and should not be, the last word on school security. Specifically, important lessons may arise from Lord Cullen's public inquiry into the Dunblane tragedy. The Government will of course consider carefully any further issues that that inquiry raises, but school security should not be an issue to be considered only in the wake of individual high-profile incidents which, however shocking, reveal only a partial picture of the problems faced by most schools. To be effective, school security measures must be based on a regular and realistic assessment of the day-to-day risks faced by schools in different areas and in conditions that will vary over time. It is important that all people concerned remain alert to new needs and to changing circumstances. Protective measures are relevant only if they enable school staff and pupils to work and to study in safety.

That must be a continuing priority for all people with a part to play. It is one to which the Government are fully committed, and I refer the hon. and learned Gentleman especially to the Department's guidance to schools on security issues, which covers crime prevention in schools, intruder alarm systems, closed circuit television, security lighting, school glazing and vandalism, graffiti removal and control, lockers and secure storage and "Schoolwatch UK", a video on the main criminal threats faced by schools.

The Government are fully committed to the security of the UK's schools. I was sorry that, even though the hon. and learned Gentleman and the hon. Member for Leicester, East spoke on this subject with such emotion,

I yet again failed to hear the amount of money that may be forthcoming from the Labour party in this matter. Again, no spending pledges were made, but there was merely a plea for more money.

Mr. Janner: Wait until we are elected.

Mrs. Gillan: That will be the day.

I congratulate the hon. and learned Gentleman on securing the debate and I hope that, tomorrow, he will be big enough to welcome the report warmly, and the Government's response.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 14 May 1996

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

HENRY JOHNSON, SONS AND CO., LIMITED BILL

Read the Third time, and passed.

AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND BANKING GROUP BILL *[Lords]*

Read a Second time, and committed.

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH

Kidney Transplants

1. **Ms Hodge:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients are currently awaiting kidney transplants; and what was the corresponding figure in (a) 1990 and (b) 1985. [27981]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Horam): On 31 March 1996, there were 5,231 patients awaiting kidney transplants. On 31 December 1990, the figure was 3,668 and on 31 December 1985, it was 3,443. Improvements in medicine and surgery have allowed many more people to receive renal dialysis and so be added to the transplant list.

Ms Hodge: I am intrigued by that answer because the figures seem somewhat at variance with those that were given to me by the National Kidney Federation. It has expressed some concern that the number of those waiting for kidney transplants has increased by 50 per cent. over that time frame whereas—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady must put a question.

Ms Hodge: Does the Minister agree with the concern that has been expressed by the National Kidney Federation that the number of people waiting for kidney transplants between those years has increased by 50 per cent. whereas the number of transplants that has been executed is 30 per cent? That is a huge indictment of the national health service. Does he wish to comment on two important matters that were raised by the National Kidney Federation, first that—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. Hon Members must get accustomed to the fact that questions must be brisk and to the point. I have said from time to time that we are not proceeding down the Order Paper properly because of long questions and long answers. I appeal to all Members for short, sharp, brisk questions. That is the way to do it.

Ms Hodge *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady has made her point well. I expect a brisk reply from the Minister.

Mr. Horam: I shall certainly keep my wind-up short. I am surprised that the hon. Lady mentioned the National Kidney Federation because I saw its representatives only a few weeks ago and they expressed satisfaction with progress although, obviously, they would like to see quicker progress. I hope that the hon. Lady will join me in welcoming this week the president of Rotary International, Dr Keith Barnard-Jones, who hopes to put another 7 million people on the donor register. That will be the best action that can be taken to help the people about whom the hon. Lady is concerned.

Mr. Nigel Evans: I welcome the fact that the number of people receiving dialysis since 1983 has doubled. I also welcome the Government's 1994 initiative on placing the donor organ register on computer. I and other hon. Members pressed for that. Does he think that there is some disappointment at the fact that there are only 3 million people on that register? Will he look at other initiatives in addition to the one that he has just announced to try to entice more people who used to fill in and carry cards to put themselves on the organ registration computer scheme?

Mr. Horam: I welcome my hon. Friend's long-standing interest in this matter. We are also advertising on television to get more donors and in my hon. Friend's area, the north-west of England, there is a particular experiment in the hospitals that is designed to get more donors.

Mr. McLeish: Despite the Minister's characteristic complacency, does he accept and acknowledge that the treatment of kidney failure in England and Wales is facing a real crisis, with damaging consequences for patients, that, every year, 1,000 people are dying because of their failure to receive kidney dialysis machine treatment, and that the differences between regions in terms of treatment are grotesque and totally unacceptable? Will he not say that the market is distorting patient priorities? The Government must act to put an end to that scandal.

Mr. Horam: I reject emphatically all the hon. Gentleman's allegations. The renal review was welcomed by the National Kidney Federation, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Barking (Ms Hodge), and which has expressed considerable satisfaction with the position. Of course, it wants to go faster, but we have not only published the renal review, but put in place further guidelines to health authorities, which will tackle the problem. I agree with the hon. Gentleman about one thing: there are disparities between the regions. The guidelines will help to tackle those.

GPs (Drugs Choice)

2. **Dr. Goodson–Wickes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what consultation he has had on recommendations to GPs on choices of drugs. [27982]

The Minister for Health (Mr. Gerald Malone): We fund several sources of information for general practitioners on drug treatments, consulting a wide range of professional and other bodies as appropriate. GPs are, of course, free to choose which drugs to prescribe for their patients, in the light of the information available to them.

Dr. Goodson–Wickes: My hon. Friend will remember the understandable disquiet expressed by GPs about the limited list, which was subsequently, and rightly, replaced by, and expanded to, a selected list. The pilot study being done on a computer-aided scheme known as Prodigy is also causing concern. Will he give an absolute assurance that this is a flexible system that will ensure that economic considerations do not override the most important consideration: the patient's clinical needs?

Mr. Malone: I am happy to confirm that. That is exactly the purpose of the project: to enable general practitioners to prescribe more effectively for their patients. The system is based on 600 guidelines, which are based on already published information from, for example, the British National Formulary, so I can give him that undertaking. We will, of course, see how the project proceeds. As he knows, it will be thoroughly evaluated.

Mr. Simon Hughes: If the Government believe in taking action on the basis only of the best scientific advice, why, last October, did they issue vague advice to every GP about certain third-generation oral contraceptives—with the result that about 200,000 women stopped taking the pill and about 3,000 women had abortions—when it is clear that there was no new scientific evidence that there was a danger, when the European regulatory body ruled last month that there was no new scientific advice and when there has been no other support for that Government action? Will the Minister apologise for an appalling piece of advice and confirm that no action will be taken against any of the drugs in terms of regulating differently?

Mr. Malone: I disagree with the hon. Gentleman profoundly. The best possible scientific advice was made available to the medical community at the first available opportunity, which it has the right to expect from a Government and a Government organisation. The hon. Gentleman need not shake his head because he has had detailed replies to what I think must be between 200 and 300 written parliamentary questions that he has tabled on this matter. Every morning, as I do the 30 or 40 more that he has tabled from some inspired source, he is seldom absent from my mind.

Dame Jill Knight: Have not the Government's fundholding schemes given GPs great freedom to treat their patients in the way in which they wish? Is my hon. Friend aware of many GPs' extensive concern that the Labour party proposes to get rid of the scheme?

Mr. Malone: Especially in relation to the ability to prescribe and to retain any savings that are made in prescription budgets, my hon. Friend is right. At present, 53 per cent. of the population in England are covered by GP fundholders. It would be appalling if that system were abolished, as the Labour party is promising.

Ms Harman: Will the Minister admit that approved prescribing practice was one of the many unsubstantiated claims that he has made for GP fundholding? Will he take this opportunity, before the Audit Commission report next week, to admit that he has made wildly exaggerated claims about fundholding? Does he understand that all general practitioners, fundholders and non-fundholders, want to work on the basis of partnership, not division and co-operation, and not cut-throat competition? That means replacing fundholding with Labour's system of GP commissioning.

Mr. Malone: When it comes to shooting from the hip about documents that have not been published, we do not need any lessons from the hon. Member for Peckham (Ms Harman) do we, Madam Speaker? I thought that her public accusations yesterday about fundholding and a primary care-led NHS were a disgrace. They were totally unsubstantiated. Unlike the hon. Lady, I do not intend to break a confidence about a report that we have received. That is extraordinary, coming from a party that has changed its policy on fundholding so many times, from outright abolition under the hon. Lady's predecessor to a half-way house from her initially. Now, in *The Times* today, I see that the Labour party is not even going to bring its policy to abolish fundholding to the House, but will do it by some covert means as yet undescribed because, if it were ever to form a Government, it would not have the courage to bring to the House a measure to abolish something that has the support of 51 per cent. of general practitioners in England.

Mr. Congdon: I welcome the fact that generic prescribing has doubled over the past 10 years. Does my hon. Friend agree that it represents good value for the taxpayer and good care for the patient? Following the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Dr. Goodson–Wickes), can my hon. Friend confirm that, whether GPs use Prodigy or any other computer-based software, steps will be taken to ensure that they are given the widest possible choice of drugs from which to select?

Mr. Malone: My hon. Friend is right. The Prodigy system is not designed to limit GPs' ability to prescribe. I fully support the move to generic prescribing. It is excellent and should be encouraged. I can tell my hon. Friend that the Prodigy scheme, which gives clinical guidelines to doctors, is also capable of being amended by them in the light of what they think will be best for their patients.

Diet (Health Aspects)

3. **Ms Quin:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he last met his EU counterparts to discuss health aspects of diet. [27983]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Bowis): I last did so on 30 November at the Council of Health Ministers and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State met them this morning.

Ms Quin: Are the Minister and the Secretary of State for Health among those who favour retaliation against the European Union because of the beef ban? Given that some countries have banned British beef for far longer than the European Union, can the Minister explain why Tory Euro-sceptics are not urging retaliation against those countries? Will the Minister tell us what specific proposals he and the Secretary of State have to get those other countries to lift their bans?

Mr. Bowis: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State had a successful meeting with our European colleagues at the Council of Health Ministers this morning. They agreed with him that it is important to seek the facts and to base our decisions on those facts and the evidence, and that we should work together to improve understanding of the evidence. I think that the House would unite around that, and I hope that the hon. Lady will join us. We can then say clearly, in this country and elsewhere, that British beef is safe and British beef is best. Effective safeguards are in place and it is a pity that some of the hon. Lady's colleagues seem determined to undermine that confidence.

Dame Angela Rumbold: Does my hon. Friend agree that, far from encouraging our European partners to enter into discussions about diet, it would be much more profitable if some members of the press, the popular press and others who write articles about diet and encourage people to go on foolish diets, were to be co-ordinated and given better direction so that some of our young people do not embark on diets after dangerous dietary advice?

Mr. Bowis: My right hon. Friend is right. Within a domestic and European context we are seeking to encourage the fact that the right sort of diet is a balanced diet, preferably accompanied by adequate and moderate levels of exercise. That is something behind which the European Council of Health Ministers has united as we look for our health promotion programme, which exchanges evidence and information about good practice. We all need a sensible diet, not a faddy one.

Mr. Sheerman: Do we not have a lot to learn from our European counterparts about good and healthy diets? Even though the Secretary of State helped destabilise the market in beef, was not the response in Europe, America, Australia and elsewhere to draw their own conclusions and act along those lines very sensibly?

Mr. Bowis: There we go again. There goes a Labour Member doing precisely what the hon. Member for Peckham (Ms Harman) did when the problem started. In the House, she said that public confidence was "hanging by a thread", and she has since done nothing but try to cut that thread. The hon. Gentleman is doing the same. Happily, we are backed in our belief by the European Commissioner, by experts in this country, by our chief medical officer and by the facts and the evidence. If the hon. Gentleman looked at the facts and the evidence, he would be on our side on this issue and not with the hon. Member for Peckham.

New Drugs (Research)

4. **Mr. Lidington:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to encourage research by British pharmaceutical companies into new drugs. [27984]

Mr. Malone: The pharmaceutical price regulation scheme encourages pharmaceutical companies to conduct research in Britain by allowing them to offset a significant part of research and development costs against the profits that they may make from sales to the national health service. The scheme is structured to balance fair prices for the NHS with reasonable returns for companies so that they can continue to develop new and improved drugs.

Mr. Lidington: Does my hon. Friend agree that the United Kingdom not only has a world-leading pharmaceutical industry but is acting as a magnet for investment by international pharmaceutical companies—an example of which he recently saw in my constituency? Will he assure the House that the Government will continue to pursue both pricing policies and general economic policies that will enable the pharmaceutical industry to continue to be a world leader, create new jobs and attract investment?

Mr. Malone: My hon. Friend is right that both factors encourage the pharmaceutical industry to expand and to achieve a great record of success. As he said, I was delighted to attend the opening of the refurbished headquarters and research base of Janssen-Cilag in his constituency. It is exactly the point that such a company is locating its facilities in Britain. We have an excellent record in the pharmaceutical industry, which is underpinned by the Government's policies.

Mr. Beggs: When the Minister next meets representatives of the British pharmaceutical companies, will he encourage them to locate research facilities in Northern Ireland, where the availability of highly qualified graduates has already contributed to the success of Ivex Pharmaceuticals, Norbrook Laboratories and, most recently, Randox Laboratories?

Mr. Malone: I shall certainly pass that on to my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who has direct responsibility for such matters. I would not be at all surprised if the pharmaceutical companies were already aware of exactly the hon. Gentleman's point. As part of the United Kingdom, I expect Northern Ireland to participate in our excellent environment for investment by pharmaceutical companies.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: Does my hon. Friend agree that Zeneca plc pharmaceuticals company, which is based in my constituency on two main sites that employ about 5,000 people, has the most outstanding record in research, development and marketing of drugs that greatly benefit the people of this country? Will he ensure that he continues to emphasise the importance of proprietary drugs, which enable such companies to conduct research and development, and will he discourage the merger and takeover mania that, at the end of the day, creates no benefits either for the companies or the thousands of people who are laid off and put out of work as a result?

Mr. Malone: I cannot give my hon. Friend a satisfactory answer to his last point. I certainly acknowledge Zeneca's contribution. I am pleased to be able to confirm that the pharmaceutical industry makes a remarkable contribution not only in his constituency, but in the constituencies of many hon. Members, and that pharmaceutical companies contribute to the excellent record in Britain. The UK represents only 3.5 per cent. of the world market, but accounts for 6 per cent. of world production and 8 per cent. of world research and development. That has not happened by accident; such success has been achieved by the sustained application of the Government's policies.

NHS Building Projects

5. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much has been spent on major NHS building projects over the last four years. [27985]

7. **Mr. Luff:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many major NHS building projects have been completed since 1979. [27987]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Stephen Dorrell): The total spent on major national health service building projects over the past four years is £1.36 billion. Approximately 860 major NHS building projects were completed between 1 April 1980 and 31 March 1996.

Mr. Robathan: The House must find it puzzling to compare the picture of the national health service painted by Opposition Members with the reality of capital investment in NHS hospitals over the past four years. My right hon. Friend will know about the three excellent general hospitals in Leicestershire.

Madam Speaker: Order. I have not heard a question yet.

Mr. Robathan: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, by the time that he opens yet another new project at Leicester royal infirmary on Friday, £48 million will have been invested in that constituency alone, to the benefit of all the people of Leicestershire, including my constituents and his?

Mr. Dorrell: My hon. Friend is right. He could also have mentioned that of the more than 800 major projects completed since 1980, one was the new Glenfield hospital in his constituency. That represented a major new investment, typical of the investment boom in the NHS over the past 15 years.

Mr. Luff: Will my right hon. Friend give me his personal assurance that he will do all that he can to add a new Worcester royal infirmary to that fine record, by facilitating the signing of contracts in the autumn? Does he agree that the staff, who at the last count had reduced to only 200 the number of people waiting for more than six months, with no one waiting more than nine months, deserve the new hospital, bearing in mind the increasing decrepitude of the current buildings?

Mr. Dorrell: My hon. Friend seeks an assurance that we shall proceed with all speed with the proper assessment of the new hospital proposal in Worcester. As he knows, I am a resident of the city of Worcester, and I remember the story of the delays in the project, which goes back more than 20 years. I am pleased to have been the Minister responsible for introducing the private finance initiative, which gives my hon. Friend's constituents the best possible assurance that the objectives and ambitions widely shared in the city for many years can at last be realised.

Mr. Barry Jones: In boasting of his billions, is the right hon. Gentleman not confessing that he has been beating up and robbing the Secretary of State for Wales? Why have we not had that type of building programme in Wales? Why cannot the wonderful Deeside community hospital in my constituency be extended? That is what we want.

Mr. Dorrell: I am sure that the investment programme has been continuing throughout the health service in the United Kingdom as a whole, and that Wales, like the rest of the kingdom, will be able to benefit from the new freedom that I have introduced into the national health service through the private finance initiative, which Labour Front-Bench spokesmen opposed. The hon. Gentleman should address the hon. Member for Peckham (Ms Harman), who is the true enemy of investment in the NHS in Wales.

Mr. Spearing: The Secretary of State refers to the advantages of the private finance initiative, but does he not know that at the Newham general hospital, where new building is expected and required, no timetable has been set for it, precisely because of the requirements of the PFI? Why should the people providing capital for those projects inevitably have at least some part in the management of the hospital?

Mr. Dorrell: With great respect to the hon. Gentleman, he is barking up a familiar tree and trying to turn history on its head. He is saying that the PFI is responsible for a delay in the capital investment programme in his constituency, yet the whole history of the national health service is a history of unwarranted delays in required capital investment. It is precisely because the PFI offers escape from that discipline and control that we so much welcome it.

Mr. Jacques Arnold: Will my right hon. Friend emphasise the fact that that excellent hospital building programme will be accelerated by the PFI? Will he, in particular, welcome the £100 million project for the new district general hospital at Darenth park in north-west Kent?

Mr. Dorrell: I can certainly confirm that the project to which my hon. Friend refers is being assessed in the context of the PFI. I share his hope that we shall be able to move the project forward. My hon. Friend—like every other hon. Member, on both sides of the House—can have the assurance that the PFI means that, where there is a demand and a need for an investment programme to proceed, it will now proceed without the distortions and constraints that have been the history of NHS capital investment for very nearly 50 years.

Mr. Barron: Is not the truth of the matter that, in the most recent budget, the Government cut capital expenditure in the NHS by 17 per cent? Is it not also true that the Secretary of State promised the House and the country that, last year, there would be one new hospital a month? Is it not true that hospitals that the country was promised years ago have still not been delivered, and that the PFI has slowed down the building of hospitals—such as that in Swindon and that which was promised on several occasions in Norwich?

At a conference in the City last month, which was attended by the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam), a call was made for direct agreements to be made between PFI companies and NHS purchasers. We know what plans the Government have for the new hospital in Scotland, but we and the public want to know whether the Secretary of State will tell us that no such direct contracts will be made and that there will be no privatisation of the NHS.

Mr. Dorrell: The Government have made it abundantly clear that the PFI is not about the privatisation of clinical services. The House and the country would like to know from Labour Front Benchers what their policy is on the issue. The leader of the Labour party says that the PFI is "right in principle". The shadow health spokesman says that the PFI is "a new trick" to privatise the health service. Which of those is the Labour party's attitude—can it decide?

Regional Health Authorities

6. **Mr. Garnier:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimates have been made of the savings resulting from the abolition of the regional health authorities. [27986]

Mr. Dorrell: Total annual savings from the abolition of regional health authorities are expected to be about £100 million. A further £50 million has also been saved by the creation of single health authorities at local level. These substantial savings will be retained by the NHS and reinvested in patient care.

Mr. Garnier: Can my hon. Friend confirm that, with the abolition of the Trent regional health authority, patients in Leicestershire will benefit from a huge additional amount of money to be spent directly on patient care? Can he also confirm that, nationally, with other savings, we are now looking at an additional input of about £2 billion a year being spent directly on patient care?

Mr. Dorrell: My hon. and learned Friend is certainly right to say that there has been huge growth from a variety of different sources, which are delivering an expansion of patient care. The figure associated with increased administrative efficiency is £300 million in total, coming from regional health authorities, the reorganisation of district health authorities and the more efficient discharge of administrative functions within trusts. That is £300 million—a 1 per cent. increase in the total resources available for patient care—through more efficient administration.

Mr. Milburn: Will the Secretary of State confirm that, despite the abolition of the regional health authorities, the NHS bureaucracy bill increased by 6 per cent. in the past year alone? Will he also admit that the Government's market in health care has landed the NHS with an extra bureaucracy bill of £1,500 million every year—public money that should be invested in front-line patient services? Before he gets carried away, will he explain how 20,000 more managers and 50,000 fewer nurses add up to an NHS in which patients come first?

Mr. Dorrell: Constant repetition of wrong statistics does not make them right. As the hon. Gentleman very well knows, those statistics do not present anything like a fair representation of what has happened. The question that the Labour party has to answer is whether it believes—as did the predecessor of the hon. Member for Peckham (Ms Harman)—that the traditional health service was undermanaged, or whether it wants to go back to the health service as it was in the early 1980s. If it wants to go back to that, it will find no constituency for the administrative upheaval that will be involved. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the reality is that we are now committed to reducing the spend on administration to increase the spend on patient care. That is the commitment that the Government are in the process of delivering.

Mental Health Care (Isle of Wight)

8. **Mr. Barry Field:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about funding for mental health care on the Isle of Wight. [27988]

Mr. Bowis: In addition to the £7.2 million budget for mental health planned by the Isle of Wight health authority, I am pleased that we have been able to award a £305,000 grant from the mental health challenge fund.

Mr. Field: I am pleased to learn that the Isle of Wight has been so successful in obtaining funds from the mental health challenge fund. Is the Minister aware that the money will be used to extend the partnership with the island's social services as well as for a 24-hour crisis intervention team, which is badly needed on the island?

May I thank him on behalf not only of myself but of everyone involved in mental health care on the island for listening to my representations on these difficult issues. Is he pleased to know that on Friday I had a tooth extracted on the national health service? It has brought me great relief and it gave my dentist great satisfaction. Is it not a fact that the Conservatives have cared for the NHS for more than 30 years—a record that far exceeds that of any other party in the nation?

Mr. Bowis: Yes. I am sure that if my hon. Friend puts his tooth under his pillow he will get a bit more, too. I thank my hon. Friend for his thanks. He has been a persistent and persuasive advocate on behalf of the island. He arranged a useful and constructive meeting with his health and social services authorities. The funding has enabled us to see an extension of the 24-hour staffed accommodation on the island and the establishment of the 24-hour crisis intervention team. I was also pleased to be able to allocate an extra £1.9 million to the health authority to enable it to cope with its merger period.

Accident and Emergency Units

9. **Mr. Simpson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what national guidelines exist for hospital accident and emergency units on the standard tests to be undertaken in relation to young women in severe abdominal pain when brought to a hospital; and if he will make a statement. [27989]

Mr. Malone: The management of any particular patient is a matter for the judgment of the clinicians involved. There are no national guidelines for such cases, but many hospitals have local protocols based on best clinical practice and taking account of local circumstances. I expect clinical judgment to be informed by the regular reports issued by the confidential inquiry into maternal deaths.

Mr. Simpson: I ask this question having just come through the traumatic experience of going to the local hospital with a family member who was left requiring almost emergency surgery, following the failure to carry out basic tests in the accident and emergency unit. Is the Minister aware that in the discussions that followed the clinical staff of the hospital said that the Government's failure to provide guidelines about basic tests which could and should be provided had left a huge loophole in the quality of emergency services on offer in hospitals around the country? Poor financial structuring renders reliance on professional judgment open to the fact that there are not enough professionally qualified staff in A and E units to ensure that people are not left unnecessarily in life-threatening circumstances.

Mr. Malone: I do not accept that from the hon. Gentleman. I know of his experience in the matter. That is why I have looked particularly carefully into what advice is given to those who exercise clinical judgment. It is for everyone who exercises clinical judgment in any situation in a hospital, be it in an accident and emergency unit or otherwise, to make him or herself aware of the advice. That is why we have the confidential inquiry which reports every three years into maternal deaths. It specifically recommends that when any young woman presents problems of this kind, all steps should be taken to diagnose whether a pregnancy or ectopic pregnancy is involved.

The confidential inquiry is set to report again in the coming months and I understand that it will take that guidance further. I hope that that might give the hon. Gentleman some reassurance.

Sir Sydney Chapman: It is the opinion of the Royal College of Surgeons that one in four deaths in accident and emergency departments is avoidable. Does my hon. Friend agree that the most effective way in which the Government could respond to that appalling statistic is, at least in large urban areas, to recognise the advances that have been made in medical technology and concentrate more A and E resources in fewer hospitals? That would provide greater consultant and doctor cover. Could not the disadvantage to some of having to travel further be met by putting paramedics on every blue light ambulance?

Mr. Malone: I am sure my that hon. Friend will welcome the fact that, especially in the London ambulance service, increased use is being made of paramedics both in ambulances and on motor cycles. I take his point that we must provide the best possible accident and emergency service for everyone. It is for clinicians to guide how that can best be offered in the circumstances. I am sure that my hon. Friend welcomes the great increase in the number of accident and emergency specialist consultants.

NHS Income

10. **Mr. Foulkes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the percentage of NHS income received from (a) private sources, (b) taxation, (c) prescription charges and (d) other sources in 1995. [27990]

Mr. Dorrell: The percentage of national health service income in 1994-95 from the sources listed by the hon. Gentleman was: from private sources, 1.4 per cent.; from taxation and national insurance contributions, 96.8 per cent.; from prescription charges, 0.9 per cent.; and from other sources, 0.9 per cent.

Mr. Foulkes: That is exactly the reply that I expected. Does the Secretary of State agree that that shows the creeping privatisation of the NHS?

Mr. Dorrell: The strategy of the hon. Member for Peckham (Ms Harman) has obviously been kept secret from the hon. Gentleman. My answer shows no such thing. It shows that the national health service continues under this Government to be a tax-funded health service, providing health care on the basis of people's clinical need and without regard to their ability to pay.

Mr. Thomason: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that it was the Labour party that introduced legislation to increase charges on prescriptions and that the proportion of public funding for the NHS has remained constant for the past decade?

Mr. Dorrell: Yes. My hon. Friend is right. The commitment to the national health service as a system to

provide health care to those who need it on the basis of their clinical need is shared across the House. What is contrary to the public interest, and what makes me angry, is that that consensus is being undermined by the Opposition.

Mr. Bryan Davies: Everyone knows that the increases in prescription and dental charges have been excessive over the last 17 years. What is behind that? Is it the Government's belief that people who can afford to pay value their health more?

Mr. Dorrell: Everyone is aware that the charges were introduced under legislation passed by a Labour Government and that 85 per cent. of NHS prescriptions are dispensed without a charge. The charge is made on those who are in a position to pay.

Total Purchasing Initiative

11. **Sir Irvine Patnick:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the interest shown by GPs in the total purchasing initiative. [27991]

Mr. Malone: I was pleased to announce a second wave of 34 total purchasing projects from April this year, bringing the total in England to 85.

Sir Irvine Patnick: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. Does he agree that that shows an overwhelming response to the pilots, including a surgery in Sheffield, and that GPs, whether or not they are fundholders, need to purchase the best possible care for their patients? Have not the Opposition Front-Bench spokesmen shown today that they are totally opposed to fundholding and will abolish it if they are given the opportunity?

Mr. Malone: My hon. Friend is right. It would be a great shame if the benefits that are emerging from the total purchasing pilot in Sheffield were to be lost should ever the Labour party get into office and abolish fundholding, and with it total fundholding, as it has promised.

Private Finance Initiative

12. **Mr. Pike:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many NHS trust hospitals have now agreed major capital work schemes under the PFI. [27992]

Mr. Dorrell: Since the launch of the private finance initiative, 41 national health service trust schemes valued at £1 million or above have been approved, at a total capital value of £457 million. Contracts have been signed in 26 of those cases.

Mr. Pike: Does the Secretary of State acknowledge that many NHS trusts believe that PFI applications cause delay in schemes being approved and that at times, the detail of schemes must be changed to meet PFI priorities? Is that situation acceptable? Can the right hon. Gentleman confirm that the fourth phase at Burnley general hospital will now go ahead speedily?

Mr. Dorrell: I might have hoped that the hon. Gentleman would welcome that a decision was announced in his constituency in February to invest a further £8.9 million in Burnley general hospital. I did not hear a welcome for that development, which is part of the biggest-ever investment programme in the history of the national health service, coming from the hon. Gentleman's lips. The hon. Gentleman might have seen fit to welcome it. He says that the PFI is responsible for new delays in the NHS programme, but that is to turn history on its head. In reality, the history of NHS investment has been one of delays caused by the old system. The Government have emancipated the health service from those distortions.

PRIME MINISTER

Engagements

Q1. **Mr. Harry Greenway:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Tuesday 14 May. [28011]

The Prime Minister (Mr. John Major): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further meetings later today.

Mr. Greenway: Bearing in mind the eternal anguish caused to families and the British people by the murders of my constituent Philip Lawrence and of the teacher and children of Dunblane, may I have my right hon. Friend's absolute assurance that the Government will spare no effort to ensure proper security for schools and proper gun controls?

The Prime Minister: As to school security, we have today accepted the recommendations of the working group that was set up by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment following the tragic murder of Mr. Lawrence, and we shall press on with implementing them. As to Dunblane, I have made it clear that when we have the chance to consider Lord Cullen's recommendations and to consult other parties in the House, if legislation is found to be necessary—as I personally suspect it will—we have already set aside time in our parliamentary programme. I believe that there is a consensus in the House that schools should be secure places in which children can learn free from fear. Parents expect no less, and we will do all that we can to ensure that is the case.

Mr. Blair: I support the Prime Minister in his welcome for the report on school security. Is not it a sad but true reflection of the need for such a report that in the past year, three in five schools have been vandalised by intruders and a high degree of pupils and teachers were actually assaulted by intruders? As well as accepting the working group's recommendations, will the Government fully fund them—if necessary from within the current financial year?

The Prime Minister: We have made it clear that there will be a Government funding programme over whatever period is necessary to follow through the recommendations. We have not yet had the chance to study the recommendations in full, cost them or determine how rapidly they can be implemented. However, we will not be seeking delay but seeking to carry out the recommendations as speedily as practicable.

Mr. Blair: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that reply. I am sure that he knows that vandalism costs a lot of money—so the sooner that action is taken, the better financially. Will the Prime Minister agree to the working group's request to be allowed to examine the broader problem of behaviour in schools? Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the routine violence suffered by many teachers in schools is absolutely intolerable? Given that there are 11,000 school exclusions every year, which is about treble the previous number, we would co-operate fully in any legislation designed to make the time limits for exclusion more rational and to render the entire system of exclusions more acceptable.

The Prime Minister: There may be areas of agreement and I welcome the support of the right hon. Gentleman. As hon. Members will know, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment is examining this matter. It is important that we ensure proper behaviour in schools and proper sanctions by teachers. The Government would welcome support across the Chamber on this issue.

Q2. **Mr. Dunn:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Tuesday 14 May. [28012]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply that I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Dunn: Given that Sevenoaks district council, which is controlled by Labour and the Liberal Democrats, has just increased its council tax by a staggering and unprecedented 90 per cent.—which is a nightmare for council tax payers—does the Prime Minister agree with the maxim: "Dogs bark, cats miaow and socialists put up taxes"?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is being slightly unfair to the Liberal Democrats, who seem to have helped on this occasion with the tax raising. If one looks across local government, one sees that it is Liberal, Lib-Lab and Labour councils that ransack the pockets of council tax payers. *[Interruption.]* I am glad that Labour Members like extra taxes. This morning I read that the shadow Secretary for Employment wants to tax more as a sop to the trade unions.

The Government see the removal of child benefit as a teenage tax. Many Labour Members want to tax anyone who earns more than the shadow Transport Secretary. *[Interruption.]* Yes, there is more. In Scotland, the tartan tax is an extra tax. The Labour party wants to tax business more with a minimum wage. There are plenty of opportunities for more arguments in the shadow Cabinet about the Labour party's tax policy.

Q3. **Ms Lynne:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Tuesday 14 May. [28013]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Lady to the reply that I gave some moments ago.

Ms Lynne: In light of the recent remarks made by leading film stars and others, does the Prime Minister agree with me and with them that violence on television and in films can lead to horrific copycat killings? Will he put whatever pressure he can on the film censor to withdraw the video certificate from "Natural Born Killers" and to persuade the BBC not to broadcast it?

The Prime Minister: I share the concern of the hon. Lady and the concern of millions of people in this country about the level of violence in feature films and, perhaps even more damaging, in videos that are readily available to young people. It is encouraging that the concerns are echoed by many people in the film industry. I have not seen "Natural Born Killers", but everything that I have heard about it suggests that it is distasteful. I hope that the British Board of Film Classification will hear what the hon. Lady has to say, consider it with great care and act on it.

Mr. Yeo: Has my right hon. Friend seen today's reports recommending less confrontation in Parliament? Does he agree that the quickest way to achieve this will be for the parties that claim to be against crime to vote in favour of, and not against, the Government's increasingly successful law and order measures?

The Prime Minister *rose—*

Mr. Yeo: In addition, the parties that claim they want to help British men and women into jobs should join the Government in saying no to the social chapter. In short, new Labour should finally tell the truth and say that the Tories were right all along.

The Prime Minister: I am glad that I made way for the second half of my hon. Friend's question; it was well worth waiting for.

I am surprised by the apparent amusement of the Opposition about dealing with these important issues, when their policies would not deal with a single one of them. Opposition for its own sake is generally what we get from the Opposition parties; we have got used to that. If they meant what they said, they would change.

Intelligence Headquarters (Germany)

Q4. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Prime Minister what discussions he has had with Chancellor Kohl about the arrangements made by the German intelligence chief, for showing Ali Fallahian, Iranian intelligence chief, round the Wiesbaden intelligence headquarters unit of the Verfassungschutz; and if he will make a statement. [28014]

The Prime Minister: I have had no such discussions with Chancellor Kohl.

Mr. Dalyell: As three official documents of the German Government, brought to the attention of the

British Government, confirm that Iranian-orchestrated terrorism has operated out of Germany for years, and against the background that I and Dr. Swire of the Lockerbie relatives have brought to the Government's attention before I asked this question, will the Prime Minister reconsider responsibility for Lockerbie in the light of what he now knows?

The Prime Minister: We have very carefully examined all the documentation that has been made available to us by the hon. Gentleman and others. The alleged involvement of others in the bombing has been exhaustively investigated; nothing that has been presented to the Government has been lightly laid aside without proper examination. My noble and learned Friend the Lord Advocate has concluded, on the basis of all the evidence, that there is a case for the two accused Libyans to answer and there remains no evidential basis for bringing charges against the nationals of any other country.

The case is not closed. If there is further evidence, we will of course examine it, but the evidence needs to be founded, not unfounded speculation. Any evidence of that sort should be provided to the police or the Government and it will be fully and properly examined.

Engagements

Q5. **Mr. Rendel:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Tuesday 14 May. [28015]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Rendel: Given that about 50 councils throughout the country are now left without a single Conservative representative, and given that probably, in those areas, on average, about 20 per cent. of the electorate still supports the Conservative party and votes for it, does the Prime Minister agree that the current electoral system is very unfair to those Conservative voters, and indeed to the Conservative party, in those areas, and that therefore it would be better to replace the electoral system with a fair vote system, which would ensure proper representation on each and every council for every significant group?

The Prime Minister: First, I apologise to the hon. Gentleman for calling him an hon. Friend. I promise the House that that was not a leak suggesting that the hon. Gentleman will cross the Floor, but merely an indication that we anticipate having his seat back at the next general election.

I do not remotely agree with the hon. Gentleman's proposals for a form of proportional voting. The only implication of a proportional voting system in this country would be that the decisions that should be made by a Government, and on which a Government should be answerable, would be made behind closed doors by Members like the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown), the leader of the Liberal party, and others, and not made by the Prime Minister and Government of the day, standing at the Dispatch Box.

Q6. **Mr. Jenkin:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Tuesday 14 May. [28016]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Jenkin: As we await the return of the Family Law Bill to the Floor of the House, will my right hon. Friend consider a change of policy to allow for mediation and reconciliation between members of the shadow Cabinet, whose marriage of convenience appears to have been poisoned by the political gigolo from Hartlepool?

The Prime Minister: They will have ample time for mediation and conciliation—perhaps five years after the general election—in opposition.

Q7. **Mr. Lewis:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Tuesday 14 May. [28017]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Lewis: Does the Prime Minister accept that refusal to act on guns before Lord Cullen reports smacks of vacillation? If the right hon. Gentleman has any doubts about yardsticks for tackling gun control, will he read the report of the Adjournment debate that I initiated on 3 May 1995? He will find that during that debate I made four sensible suggestions for the control of guns. That debate took place 12 months before Dunblane.

The Prime Minister: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would have made sensible suggestions. As for vacillation, I remind the hon. Gentleman that the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw), the shadow Home Secretary, said the other day:

> "We shall . . . carefully consider all the evidence given to the Inquiry and the recommendations which Lord Cullen makes before coming to final conclusions."

It would rather seem that the Opposition Front Bench shares the Government's view that there should be a proper examination of Lord Cullen's report before conclusions are reached. I am sorry that there seems to be a split between the Opposition Front Bench and the Opposition Benches below the Gangway.

Q8. **Mrs. Gorman:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Tuesday 14 May. [28018]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave some moments ago.

Mrs. Gorman: Is my right hon. Friend aware that Marks and Spencer, that pillar of the British nation, has announced that if we were to be so foolish as to go for a single currency, it would have to spend at least £100 million on converting its tills, and that everyone in the high street would end up with bills running into billions? Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should bring these matters to the attention of the President of France, Mr. Chirac, when he meets him for discussions? I understand that the gentleman is quite keen on a

single currency. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that he understands that underwear prices will increase in Marks in this country as well as in Paris, Lyon and all the other Marks stores in France?

The Prime Minister: I think that my hon. Friend has brought matters effectively to the attention of many people. I am not certain whether they will directly reach President Chirac.

Points of Order

3.31 pm

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. We all know that the Nolan recommendations are bedding down. However, on Question 2, the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Dr. Goodson–Wickes)—I have given the hon. Gentleman written notice that I wish to raise the matter—sought to persuade the national health service to buy more drugs under the selected or limited lists. In the declaration of interests, the hon. Gentleman declares a paid financial interest in a pharmaceutical company. I am not suggesting that he has done anything improper, because it is a matter of judgment whether that fact is announced during an oral question. When the hon. Gentleman tabled the question, he might well have provided a declaration of interest, but there is no mechanism through which to record that interest on the Order Paper. There is such a mechanism for making that information available when early-day motions are tabled.

Could we not ensure that if declarations are made by hon. Members, they are recorded on the Order Paper, so that when a Member declines to make a declaration when he tables a question, the House is informed?

Dr. Charles Goodson–Wickes (Wimbledon): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. In accordance with the traditions of the House, I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice, even if it arrived after the event. You will know, Madam Speaker, that my question made no mention of the interests of pharmaceutical companies, whether actual or implied. My question related solely to the clinical freedom for doctors to prescribe in the best interests of their patients. I thus deeply resent the hon. Gentleman's allegation. If the recommendations of the Nolan committee mean that someone such as myself, as a physician, is unable to ask questions on health matters, in which I have a professional interest, I ask for your ruling, Madam Speaker, and your protection. The matter will have to be sorted out once and for all.

Madam Speaker: It is very much a matter for the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. There is an arrangement whereby Members can register with the letter R against their question when they wish to declare an interest. I suggest that the hon. Member seeks advice if he chooses to ask questions on pharmaceuticals in future.

Dr. Goodson-Wickes: I apologise, but I repeat that I did not ask a question about pharmaceutical companies.

Madam Speaker: If there is any complaint whatsoever, the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) should raise it with the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. Hon. Members should not take up the time of the House by raising petty points of order on the Floor of the House. We have a structure and such matters should be referred there. I will hear no more on these matters in future. That is my ruling.

Mr. Robin Corbett (Birmingham, Erdington): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. During questions, reference was made to the report of the working party on school security that was published by the Department for Education and Employment. Will you inquire as to why it is not available in the Vote Office?

Madam Speaker: Certainly. I shall make some inquiries. It may well need to be available in the Vote Office. I was not sure where it was available, but I shall make inquiries right away. It is available in the Library, but perhaps we should also have it in the Vote Office, if Members so wish.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark and Bermondsey): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Last week, you kindly ruled on the matter of legal advice that the Government were given in respect of the Westminster city council district auditor's report. Further to that, is it a correct interpretation of your ruling that if the Government assert as a matter of law some advice that they have been given, they have to justify that advice by revealing it? The only reason why I raise the matter is that we are potentially at risk if the Government do not either show their hand and their advice, or change their attitude of providing completely inaccurate representations of the legal status of a district auditor's report.

Madam Speaker: I refer the hon. Gentleman and the entire House to my response last week. It is a matter of questioning the Government, who are accountable on some of these matters as a matter of debate and argument. I can give no ruling on that. It is the cut and thrust of parliamentary debate across the Floor of the House.

Mr. Tim Devlin (Stockton, South): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. My point is similar to one that was raised earlier. I do not want to try your patience, but I understand from the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards that if one travels to a foreign country and is paid for by anyone other than the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association or the Inter-Parliamentary Union, that has to be registered and it debars an hon. Member from discussing the matter in the House of Commons. That rather negates the point of going on any such journey abroad to familiarise oneself with a problem. Is that right?

Madam Speaker: That matter has been raised very many times. Members are familiar with it. We have a Committee that sits regularly to advise Members on such matters. They should not be raised individually on the Floor of the House. If the hon. Gentleman sees the Chairman of that Committee, I am sure that he will advise him accordingly.

Fishery Limits (Amendment)

3.37 pm

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to provide that the Fishery Limits Act 1976 shall have effect regardless of the provisions of the European Communities Act 1972; that Part II of the Merchant Shipping Act 1988 shall have effect as though it had not been repealed by the Merchant Shipping (Registration etc.) Act 1993; and to confer upon the Secretary of State powers to license fishing vessels to fish within United Kingdom waters, to exclude specified vessels or vessels of specified nations from fishing within United Kingdom waters, to negotiate common policies with other countries to preserve fish stocks, and to invalidate any provisions of the Common Fisheries Policy of the European Community; and for connected purposes.

The Bill is based on the fundamental principle of the British constitution that Parliament cannot bind itself and that a later Parliament can take back what was previously given away.

The Bill provides that the European Communities Act 1972, by which we accepted Community law and made it superior to British law, shall not apply to the Fishery Limits Act 1976, by which we followed the world trend to 200-mile limits. It would enable us to enforce that law against European vessels that are at present over-fishing our stocks. It would also allow British courts to enforce British law—and that would make a nice change.

The Bill would strengthen the Merchant Shipping Act 1988 in order to keep out the quota hoppers, who constitute the equivalent of about one fifth of the British fleet.

The Bill represents a way out of the common fisheries policy, which has been an unique disaster. Even the most ardent Europhiles do not defend it. It was put together days before we joined the Common Market, as it then was, to allow access to our rich fishing grounds. It was based on a principle of equal access to a common resource—the only common resource—deliberately to gain access to our stocks.

At the time, the policy was cravenly accepted and fudged through, because the Prime Minister of the day was not about to let a little matter like fishing stand in the way of his great vision. Fishing was betrayed by what happened then. As a result, a nation that contributes 75 per cent. of the stocks and the great majority of the waters gets only about one third of the catch and 12 per cent. of its value.

The common fisheries policy stopped us rebuilding our fishing industry when we lost Icelandic waters. Every other nation took its own 200-mile limit and built a strong industry behind that limit, but we were not allowed to exploit our own rich waters. We now import the fish that we used to catch for ourselves, much of it taken in our waters by European fleets and sent back to us.

The policy has not worked. It was supposed to conserve stocks, but we have a conservation crisis; it was supposed to bring harmony, but we have conflict; it was supposed to develop the industry, but we have a shrunken, battered industry; it was supposed to sustain a law, but it is driving fishermen to illegality. The policy is now reaching a crisis. Equal access means that all new entrants with big fishing fleets but no waters of their own can catch fish in our waters. Spain has shown the way, but behind Spain stands a queue—Bulgaria, Poland and the Baltic states, all with their own sizeable fishing fleets. This country will soon face a substantial reduction in its effort to make way for Spanish fishing vessels. After we have cut our effort by about one fifth, one fifth of our fleet will effectively be owned by foreigners.

As a system of conservation, this is nothing but muddle and bureaucracy. It is not a centralised system, which would be able to control catches at the port of landing and ensure a level catching ground so that other industries were not supported at the expense of ours; nor is it a system of national control. National control is the only way out, because only the nation state has an interest in conserving fish stocks and handing them on to future generations of its own fishermen. For others, those stocks are a resource to be looted, but for us they form an essential basis for the future.

I am a moderate man, and I represent an even more moderate party. Ministers have told us that they will fight for change, and they will fight for change all the more effectively if they have a big stick behind them to give them courage and confidence; but the odds are against their winning. Every other nation has a veto on concessions to us—the kind of concessions that we need. The system has not changed substantially in all the years during which it has operated. It merely gives us tighter quotas, and the tighter the quotas become, the bigger the discards will be, the more "black fish" will be brought into ports and the greater will be the degree of illegality—illegality that is becoming a way of life for many fishermen. But if those Ministers do not win, the Bill will give them the power to determine our future.

I admit that it is a question of will, but the matter must be seen in the context of our general relationships with Europe. Because the common fisheries policy is the worst policy, it is the best issue on which to test those relationships and take a firm stand in order to build a new relationship. The present relationship is disastrous. Both Government and Opposition want free association, a free market and co-operation between independent nation states, but what Europe wants is a constant drive towards deeper and tighter unities, and we are constantly dragged behind, grumbling, protesting, muttering and sulking, because we have no ground on which to stand. There is no legal basis for a new relationship that would stop the process.

The Bill provides that relationship by giving us that firm ground. I hope that this will not be seen as part of a pro or anti-Europe argument, because my main purpose is to rebuild and strengthen British fishing, which has been badly weakened and undermined. To do that, we must be able to enforce our own law, and impose our own fishing regime and conservation measures in our own waters before it is too late. If we are in control of our own waters, we can arrange swaps and deals with European countries in return for catching fish in their waters. We can reach arrangements with Iceland, Norway, Canada and other countries outside the area where we have traditionally caught fish, and they can be allowed a return catch in our waters. We can impose our own system of management and control—one that works for a change—and rebuild our industry. Most important of all, we can conserve and build up our stocks for our partners, for ourselves and for the next generation of British fishermen instead of prolonging the present disaster.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Austin Mitchell, Mr. Peter Shore, Mr. Richard Shepherd, Mr. William Ross, Rev. Ian Paisley, Mr. Nigel Spearing, Mrs. Teresa Gorman, Mr. Iain Duncan Smith and Mr. Christopher Gill.

FISHERY LIMITS (AMENDMENT)

Mr. Austin Mitchell accordingly presented a Bill to provide that the Fishery Limits Act 1976 shall have effect regardless of the provisions of the European Communities Act 1972; that Part II of the Merchant Shipping Act 1988 shall have effect as though it had not been repealed by the Merchant Shipping (Registration etc.) Act 1993; and to confer upon the Secretary of State powers to license fishing vessels to fish within United Kingdom waters, to exclude specified vessels or vessels of specified nations from fishing within United Kingdom waters, to negotiate common policies with other countries to preserve fish stocks, and to invalidate any provisions of the Common Fisheries Policy of the European Community; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday 12 July and to be printed. [Bill 129.]

Opposition Day

[13TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Westminster City Council

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

3.45 pm

Mr. Frank Dobson (Holborn and St. Pancras): I beg to move,

That this House deplores the scandalous conduct of the Tory flagship Westminster City Council; calls on the Government to condemn this malpractice on an unprecedented scale; and will regard any failure to do so as further evidence of electorally-motivated support for the council.

On Thursday, the district auditor found that leading Tory councillors on Westminster city council, assisted by council officers, the most senior of whom had originally been seconded from the Department of the Environment, had used £31.6 million to promote the electoral advantage of the Tory party at the expense of homeless families, tenants and taxpayers in Westminster. The district auditor concluded that that was unlawful, improper and disgraceful.

This homes-for-votes scandal is the biggest single scandal in the history of any local council, but it was not the only scandal in Westminster, and individuals who were found guilty and surcharged are not the only people involved.

Mr. Jacques Arnold (Gravesham): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dobson: No, I will not give way at this time.

The financial scandals in Westminster now total over £100 million, so there are more auditors' reports to come. The Tory party and Government have been involved for a decade with the Tories on Westminster city council in a squalid effort to make sure that Westminster council remains Tory controlled. They have done that whatever the cost in money, in law breaking or in the harm done to homeless families and other people who had a right in law to turn to Westminster council for somewhere decent to live. That is why the Prime Minister and every other leading Tory refuses to condemn what has been going on in Westminster.

The Prime Minister dare not condemn the wrongdoers because the wrongdoing has been known about, condoned and connived at by the Tory party and Government. Not only have the Government condoned the scandals, they have rigged the Government grant system, first to fix the poll tax in Westminster before the 1990 local government elections and secondly to keep down the council tax in Westminster. In recent years, the Government have been giving Westminster at least £20 million a year more than can be justified on any fair criteria. During that time, many Westminster services have been among the most expensive in Britain, but no Government action has been taken and not a word of ministerial criticism has been uttered because the Government have been accessories to what was going on.

[Mr. Dobson]

In the 1986 council elections, the Tory majority on Westminster council was reduced from 28 to just four. The Tories retained control of the council by a 106-vote majority in Cavendish ward, which borders my constituency. Emerging from that bruising encounter with the electorate, the Tories contemplated worse to come in the 1990 elections, but the Tories in Westminster did not decide to change their performance or their policies—they decided to change the electorate instead. If they could not persuade enough local residents to vote for them, they would get in new people who would vote for them. They did that by concentrating a policy of designated sales of council flats in eight marginal wards. According to the former Tory chair of housing in Westminster, that started with a breakfast meeting between Lady Porter, the leader of Westminster council, and the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Sir P. Beresford), who at that time was the leader of Wandsworth council, which was, she said:

"definitely 100 per cent—the beginning of the designated thing—to target marginal wards and the sort of tactics one had to use to go about it".

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Dobson: I shall not give way for the time being.

In September 1986, a secret paper was produced by officers of Westminster council's planning department. Its title gives the game away: "A Strategy for 1990—the Wandsworth Experience". It was a four-year strategy formulated by council officers to win the local elections due in 1990. The paper bemoaned the limited opportunities socially to engineer throughout Westminster, but added:

"This should remain a longer term objective, but there is an immediate need to socially engineer the population in marginal wards".

The paper was written by a council officer, a public official, paid for by the public.

Mr. Jacques Arnold: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dobson: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman and then perhaps he will sit down for a bit.

Mr. Arnold: Does the hon. Gentleman recall, in the 1970s, when he was leader of the London borough of Camden, the building of the Branch Hill council estate in Hampstead for four times the cost of what could have been provided elsewhere in the borough, and that the only common denominator was that the estate was in the Conservative marginal seat of Hampstead? Who is he to lecture the House of Commons on gerrymandering?

Mr. Dobson: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman has been briefed by Tory central office, but it should do a little better than that. If we had been trying to gerrymander, we would not have built the estate in the safest Tory ward in Hampstead.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Dobson: I shall not give way.

The main aim of that election strategy was to gerrymander the electorate by shifting council tenants out of marginal wards into safe Labour wards, and by shifting homeless families out of Westminster altogether. Contemporaneous notes by council officers, revealed during the auditor's investigation, report discussions and decisions by leading councillors in the following words, all of which are accurate quotations:

"suitable wards for housing the homeless long term, Westminster City Council families in Labour wards",

a

"very hard line on homelessness, try to ship them out

how can we get the homeless out of Westminster?

homelessness—be mean and nasty

determine if more cases can be exported

cash to homeless persons to get lost".

Those quotations are all from handwritten notes by the council's paid officials. Official papers and minutes, prepared by those same officers, refer to

"figures being prepared to show which initiatives were most likely to achieve electoral targets"

and state that

"the attached target schedules show the target for new electors in each of the eight key wards".

The copy of the document containing the last quotation bears a manuscript note from the council's solicitor saying:

"This paper should not have been written by an officer".

He added:

"This paper shows officers working for a Tory victory".

The council officer who prepared the paper confirmed to the auditor that he was working full time on monitoring progress towards meeting the electoral targets in the marginal wards.

From that and much more evidence, there can be no doubt that the whole approach by the Tory leadership of Westminster city council was geared not to the well-being of the people of Westminster, but to the electoral well-being of the Tory party. So there can be no doubt that those councillors set about emptying council flats and selling them, instead of using them to provide decent housing for homeless families and others living in overcrowded and degrading conditions.

Whatever the council may have said in public, in private, it made no bones about this being its top priority. Lady Porter prepared a note for the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Thatcher, which said:

"We in Westminster are trying to gentrify the City. We must protect our electoral position which is being seriously eroded by the number of homeless we are being forced to rehouse . . . I feel that the problem is so serious you should look at this yourself . . . I am afraid that unless something can be done, it will be very difficult for us to keep Westminster Conservative".

Mr. David Nicholson (Taunton): I have no wish at this stage to defend or excuse Lady Porter or Westminster city council. However, I ask the hon. Gentleman to consider the fact that the same local government finance system that may have benefited Westminster city council also benefited the London boroughs of Lambeth and Southwark, which are very inefficient and incompetent Labour strongholds. Can the hon. Gentleman lay his hand on his heart and say that Labour councils, when they were able to spend vast sums of taxpayers' money on building

council houses, never used that money to build the Tories out of marginal wards? In the borough of Islington where I fought three successive elections, Labour succeeded in doing just that.

Mr. Dobson: There is a paragraph or two later in my speech which deals directly with that absurd equivalence that the Tories have invented.

As a result of those policies, homeless families were left living in bed-and-breakfast accommodation and hotels. Other families were left in overcrowded and degrading conditions, while flats that became empty were sold to people who were confidently expected to be Tory voters. To get council tenants to move out, they were unlawfully offered grants by the council. Later, a Government grant scheme designed to get sitting tenants to move out to make room for homeless families was extended in the case of Westminster to induce families to leave so that their flats could be sold. That required the consent of the then Secretary of State, which was given after representations from the right hon. Member for Westminster, North (Sir J. Wheeler). His intervention at that time was understandable, after the former chair of Westminster housing committee had produced a paper for a Tory policy seminar, which specified as an objective:

"to ensure that as far as possible, Westminster's housing policies achieve the type of social and residential mix that will enable us to retain control of the Council in 1990 and to help retain the Conservative majority in the Parliamentary seat of North Westminster."

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman (Lancaster): The hon. Gentleman dismissed my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Mr. Arnold) too lightly. I have a thorough knowledge of Camden because I was the vice-chairman of the Camden housing committee when the Branch Hill estate came up for grabs. We did not wish to build those expensive houses. We preferred to spend the money on less expensive housing in the borough, which we would have done had we retained control. As it was, Labour was trying to disrupt Lord Finsberg. The Labour-controlled council went on to build 600 houses on tennis courts and woods, which were zones for public open space, simply to get people out of South End ward, which was a Tory marginal. Gerrymandering.

Mr. Dobson: Call me old-fashioned, but I have always believed that living in homes close to Hampstead heath should not be confined to the rich, but preferably should be available to everybody.

The law required Westminster council to give housing priority to persons occupying insanitary or overcrowded houses, large families, people living in unsatisfactory housing conditions and certain homeless families. The council's own policies required it to give priority to what it called category A medical cases. Some of the purchasers who moved into empty flats may have fallen into those categories, but not many. Indeed, the families in those categories of need were exactly those who lost out as a result of the council's designated sales policy.

Before we touch on the question of individual liability, lawfulness or the cost to the taxpayer, I invite the Secretary of State to tell us whether he condemns Westminster city council for ignoring the needs of the homeless and the sick. Is that how he believes a council should behave? The Secretary of State makes no contribution.

The auditor has found that that electorally motivated policy cost a fortune: a total of £31.6 million, made up mainly of such items as selling flats to newcomers at lower than the market value, loss of rent, grants to tenants to move out and the extra cost of providing further temporary accommodation for homeless families. Whatever the cost of each of those items, they were not obscure inventions of the auditor. They are the obvious, predictable losses that were bound to result from such a policy, and so the auditor has found.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (Colchester, North): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dobson: No, I shall not.

It is difficult to exaggerate the huge scale of a total loss of £31.6 million. I have checked the total budgets of every council in England. No fewer than 272 have less to spend on the services that they provide each year for all their local people than the £31.6 million used by the Westminster Tories to win eight wards in a local election.

I should like to cite some examples. Brighton's budget is £23 million, Blackpool's total is £20 million, Basildon's is £20 million, Chorley spends just £8 million, Crawley's budget is £10 million, The Wrekin's £17 million, Corby's £5 million, East Staffordshire's £10 million, Forest of Dean's £7 million, Gloucester's £11 million, and Exeter and Lincoln each have only £10 million a year to spend on services for their local people.

Yet all the areas that I have mentioned, and hundreds of others, are represented wholly or in part by Tory Members of Parliament who cannot raise their voices in criticism of Westminster's scandalous misuse of £31.6 million—far more money than their local councils are allowed to spend in a year on the people whom those Tory Members of Parliament claim to represent.

Mr. Jenkin *rose—*

Hon. Members: Give way.

Mr. Dobson: No, I have said that I shall not give way.

Let us remember that the money was spent just for electoral advantage. Just imagine £31.6 million being spent to win eight wards in a council election. The election expenses work out at £4 million a ward.

That was not the only public money that was devoted to keeping Westminster Conservative in the 1990s. Public money was also devoted to that by central Government when they introduced the poll tax during that period. The first exemplifications of the poll tax showed that the poll tax in Tory Westminster would be about the same as in Labour Camden next door, and that it would cost many people more than the rates.

That is of course what happened in many other places, but, by then, the Westminster Tories were getting used to the idea that the law did not apply to them. So they lobbied for the grant system to be rigged to bail them out. Lobbyists were hired and local Members of Parliament went on delegations. The reports and briefings produced

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by the lobbying firm GJW showed which Ministers were approached. They included the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), who was then a Minister at the Department of the Environment and is now the Secretary of State for the Environment.

The briefings record:

"John Gummer is the most alert of Ministers to political nuances . . . He will be particularly conscious that with safety nets a number of high spending Labour London Boroughs will appear to get 'off the hook' with community charges lower than Westminster".

A further report by the lobbyists states:

"Gummer is said to be angry that the D of E officials had failed to understand the real and political consequences of the redistributive effects of the community charge".

The report also referred to a paper entitled, "Electoral Disaster: the effects of safety netted community charge on some households in the City of Westminster", which specifically referred to the effects on what were called

"'marginal wards', like Cavendish and Little Venice".

The report recorded that the paper had been sent to the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal and that the lobbyists had discussed it with the right hon. Gentleman's political adviser.

The paper referred to the effects of the poll tax on "identified, aspiring Conservative voters" in Little Venice and Cavendish wards, and stated:

"the electoral consequences are bound to be adverse".

The paper also called for the needs assessments in the Government grant to be skewed to help Westminster—and that was a lesson that the right hon. Gentleman certainly learnt. At the end were six tables said to

"examine the financial impact on some of these groups in the two most marginal wards in the City".

The paper explained:

"It should be stressed that all the households examined are real ones, taken from the electoral and voting records"

Table 7 extended the analysis of the effect of the community charge on Cavendish ward. It selected all pledged Conservative voters in Great Titchfield street and Hanson street and added:

"Such voters are the heart of Cavendish Ward and are clearly essential to Conservative hopes to hold the City Council . . . It should be stressed that the properties in Table 7 are selected solely because they are pledged Conservative voters".

So what happened? As requested by Westminster, the Government duly rigged the grant system to give the council enough money to levy only a low poll tax. Tory central Government found about £25 million in extra taxpayers' money to help Westminster win those same eight marginal wards.

The rigging continues to this day. Having artificially kept down Westminster's poll tax for electoral reasons, the Government now artificially keep down Westminster's council tax for the same reasons. According not to me but to the present chief executive of Westminster council, the assistance is

"equivalent to a Council Tax increase of £197",

because the council gets grant to compensate for visitors, yet is also allowed to keep the £20 million or more that those visitors pay in parking charges.

Such is the extra subsidy given to Westminster that if it were applied to the whole country, no more than a handful of councils would need to levy any council tax. Most would be able to pay out annual rebates; Tamworth, Southampton, Redditch, Portsmouth and several other places would be able to pay rebates of more than £900.

That is not the end of the electorally motivated scandals in Westminster. The recently published Barratt report found the council, led by the same prominent councillors involved in the homes-for-votes scandal, guilty of knowingly placing homeless families in asbestos-ridden blocks of flats, and said that that decision had been

"influenced by considerations of Party advantage".

It is hard to think of a worse example of the degenerate nature of the present Tory party than that—putting lives and health at risk for party political advantage. And the scandal goes to the top, because—

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dobson: I shall finish this passage first.

The scandal goes to the top, because the Prime Minister has refused to condemn the councillors involved in the asbestos scandal. He recently said of Tory policy:

"it may have hurt but it worked",

and apparently that has now become the Tory advertising slogan. It certainly describes Tory policy on homelessness, because it hurts a family to be left in bed-and-breakfast accommodation or in a hostel, and it hurts even more to be placed in an asbestos-ridden flat.

That is what Westminster council called being

"mean and nasty to the homeless",

and it certainly worked. It gave the Tories gerrymandered local election victories in 1990 and 1994.

Mr. Peter Brooke (City of London and Westminster, South): Because of the general tenor of the Barratt report, will the hon. Gentleman give me the paragraph reference for his specific quotation from it?

Mr. Dobson: I shall give it to the right hon. Gentleman at the end of my speech.

Mr. David Shaw (Dover): It is not there.

Mr. Dobson: The hon. Member for Dover (Mr. Shaw) has just accused me of lying, but I shall deal with him later.

Of course, the auditor's report covers only the first period of the homes-for-votes scandal. Electors in Westminster have objected to the money wasted by Westminster on the scheme more recently—an estimated further £21 million. There is also the plain and deliberate failure—

Mr. Pickles: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dobson: No, I shall not.

There is also the plain and deliberate failure of Westminster council to bill leaseholders for service charges and for the cost of major repairs—an estimated further £31 million, including interest.

Further examples of wrongdoing are yet to be investigated by the district auditor: between £6 million and £7 million lost on the disposal of property below market value; spending on propaganda in the run-up to the 1990 elections; unlawful capital grants; and environmental initiatives unlawfully concentrated on the eight target marginals.

That is not the end of special Tory funding for Westminster elections. The Tories spent £1.5 million on a council propaganda campaign in the run-up to the 1990 elections. Not satisfied with all that money, Westminster Tories set up a charity—the Foundation for Business Responsibility. It channelled £98,897.96 to a public relations firm, Marketforce Communications, to help the Tories fight the local election. Contributions to that charity came from the Duke of Westminster and from Trusthouse Forte, at £5,000 each; from Taylor Woodrow, at £2,000; and from Allied Lyons, Rank Hovis McDougall, Brooke Bond OXO, Dewhurst, Whitbread and Grand Metropolitan, which all gave £1,000. None of those payments was ever declared. Another contributor was Gerald Ronson's charitable foundation, which gave £1,000. That was, of course, before Mr. Ronson went to gaol. The Westminster Tories were found out and the money had to be repaid. Even under this Government, charities are not allowed to fund political parties—not even the Tory party.

The facts of the scandals are not really in dispute. While Lady Porter and her Tory apologists may dispute the scale of the loss, or even the legality or illegality of what they have done, there can be no doubt about what they have done or why they did it.

So what is the burden of the complaint by the people surcharged and their friends? They complain that the system is unfair to them and that it places too much power in the hands of the district auditor. But that is not what the Tories said in the past about the district auditor. They were happy to give him the powers that he now enjoys under the Tory Local Government Finance Act 1982. They were quite happy to pass that law, which was to apply to every council and to every councillor in the land. I have carefully examined that Act of Parliament, which gave the district auditor his powers, and I am afraid that the Tories forgot to put in a get-out clause to say that it applied to every council except the Tory flagship council, or that it applied to every councillor except fat-cat Tory millionaires. It applies to them all.

Mr. Richard Tracey (Surbiton): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dobson: No, I shall not.

In 1989, after the district auditor had started his investigation into Westminster, the Government reasserted their view on the auditor's powers. They said:

"The auditor must assemble the evidence, and is best placed to decide whether a case exists to invoke statutory sanctions. Transferring the responsibilities from the Auditor would reduce his standing and authority, thereby lessening rather than enhancing his effectiveness. The Government have therefore decided that responsibility for taking action under Sections 19 and 20"—

of the Act—

"should remain with the Auditor";

and they remain there to this day.

Those Tories have been found with their hand in the till for electoral purposes, subsidising a Tory election campaign at the expense of other people, and especially at the expense of the homeless. But neither the Prime Minister nor the Secretary of State will condemn them. The Prime Minister said when the auditor's preliminary report was published:

"if the allegations are confirmed, I will condemn unreservedly."—[*Official Report*, 13 January 1995; Vol. 235, c. 331.]

The allegations have been confirmed. The auditor's inquiry has run its course and the decision has been made, but still the Prime Minister cannot bring himself to condemn the wrongdoing. Last week he said:

"I understand that they"—

the people who have been found guilty—

"vehemently contest the auditor's report and that they have said that they will take the matter to court. In the face of such a clear-cut protestation of innocence, I think that any sensible and cautious person would be wise to await the outcome before making a judgment."—[*Official Report*, 9 May 1996; Vol. 277, c. 362.]

How long does this process go on? When is an outcome not an outcome? Lady Porter is a very wealthy woman and can afford to go on appealing and appealing. Should she lose in the High Court, will the Prime Minister tell us that his condemnation must await the outcome in the Court of Appeal? Will he tell us that we have to await the decision of the Judicial Committee of the House of Lords, the European Court of Human Rights or the International Court of Justice at The Hague? When will he condemn this wrongdoing?

The Prime Minister's other excuse for not condemning his friends is that they have protested their innocence. But that applies to everyone who does not accept a verdict. The question that the Prime Minister must ask is, "Have our friends, our Tory friends in Tory Westminster, behaved as if they were innocent?"

People who believe that they are innocent are not afraid for others to know the truth. They say, "Here we are, here are the papers. The papers will prove that everything was above board." But that is not what the Westminster Tories have done. No, they have obstructed the auditor at every turn. Documents were shredded. Attempts were made to erase items from the memory of the council's computers. Documents that the council said that it could not find were easily found by the auditor when he decided to take a look for himself. He also then found significant new documents previously undisclosed by these innocents.

People with the responsibility for investigating the innocent do not usually have to resort to dawn raids on offices or hiring inquiry agents to track down the innocent. Innocent people do not usually have to be sub-poena'd to attend interviews. But all that has been required of the district auditor in his search for the truth. People who are innocent are usually willing to avail themselves of the opportunity to answer publicly questions about what they have done. The hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South–West (Mr. Legg) did that at the auditor's hearing and got off. Lady Porter did not do that, but now complains when she loses her case. Her problem is not that the auditor would not hear her. Her problem is that he did not believe a word that she said.

Innocent people do not usually attack the competence and integrity of the person investigating their case. "Tell the truth and shame the devil" is the motto of the innocent, but it is not the motto of Westminster Tories. They have

[Mr. Dobson]

peddled rumours to the press about the auditor, held press conferences attacking the auditor, complained of delays by the auditor. But as everyone knows—

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dobson: No, I shall not.

Mrs. Jane Kennedy (Liverpool, Broadgreen): This is an extremely important debate and I am grateful for the opportunity to ask my hon. Friend to contrast the response of the Labour party in 1985, when 47 Labour councillors in Liverpool were surcharged £106,000, with the response of the Conservative party and the disgraceful way in which it is prepared to sit on its hands when the district auditor records that £28 million has been lost to the public as a result of the conduct of its councillors.

Mr. Dobson: I do not need to repeat the point that my hon. Friend so clearly made.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dobson: No, I shall not.

As everyone knows, the auditor has done a very thorough job. He has sifted through tens of thousands of pages of documents. He has carried out a grand total of 135 interviews involving 50 people. Lady Porter was interviewed 12 times, always accompanied by her lawyers and other advisers. On one occasion, there were so many of those advisers that they could not all get in the room. The auditor gave her documentation in advance of the interviews and offered her the right to make written representations. She cancelled appointments and even asked the auditor to fly to Israel to interview her there.

Then there is the question of what the innocent do with their money.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dobson: No.

Following the auditor's preliminary report, Lady Porter sold up her personal holdings in Tesco and moved away. Is that the action of someone who is certain of her innocence?

At the time when they were harming the homeless for electoral advantage, the Tories were so ashamed that they kept secret what they were up to. Now they claim that they had legal advice that it was okay. That is just not true. In March 1987, at a Tory seminar that included the right hon. Member for Westminster, North, the then chair of the housing committee warned of the possibility of surcharge. In the same month, the Westminster city solicitor wrote to Lady Porter:

"Anything which smacks of political machinations will be viewed with great suspicion by the courts . . . The possibility of surcharge exists."

Lady Porter was specifically advised:

"the advantages of sale have to be considered not from any ulterior motive, but from the standpoint of what is right in view of the Council's role as a housing authority".

Two months later, the council consulted a QC, who is certain that he advised that it would be unlawful to target sales on the eight marginal wards and that any disposals of property had to be on legitimate housing and planning grounds. The only response from the Westminster Tories was the smokescreen of extending the policy to cover other wards while still concentrating the sales in the marginal wards, to achieve the electoral targets that they had set. Far from acting on their legal advice, it is clear that Lady Porter and her colleagues acted contrary to it. So much for all the excuses put forward by the Westminster Tories and their friends.

The Prime Minister's other excuse for not condemning the Westminster Tories is that neither he nor his Ministers condemn councils that are being investigated until the process is complete. Clearly, the Prime Minister has either just adopted that new, principled approach or his memory is so faulty that he is not fit to be Prime Minister. Up to now, he has been ever ready to leap to attack any council accused of wrongdoing—provided that it is a Labour council. To give one example, he described Monklands council as a disgrace while it was being investigated by a QC nominated by the Secretary of State for Scotland. On 15 December, that inquiry cleared Monklands council of breaking the law. No apology has been forthcoming from the Prime Minister, nor, for that matter, have we heard one from the hon. Member for Dover, who has just accused me of lying. Yet the report states:

"David Shaw, MP (Dover), had no evidence of substance to offer, notwithstanding repeated references by him to the large amount of information about the council which he claimed to possess and notwithstanding his having made reference to the council's affairs in Parliament on various occasions from late 1992 onwards . . . When I pressed him as to whether there was any direct evidence to support what was described as his allegation of nepotism, he said that there was not but that he relied on circumstantial evidence. He explained that in his view, the council were guilty of impropriety in a number of other respects which justified the inference of impropriety in the making of appointments. As his evidence went on, I became increasingly unimpressed by it. I regarded his attitude as irresponsible."

Neither the Prime Minister nor any other Cabinet Minister can put together one cogent reason for not condemning Westminster. Neither innocence nor principle nor precedent is on their side. The real reason why they will not condemn Westminster is that the Tory party, from top to bottom, from central office to 10 Downing street, from Whitehall to Westminster, has been in these scandals up to its neck. The Tories are still at it—giving Westminster council millions of pounds more grant than it is entitled to, helping it to cover up and evade responsibility and letting it off discharging its duty to the homeless.

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dobson: No, I shall not.

Some Tories have tried to justify the outrageous conduct of Westminster Tories by saying that Labour councils build homes for party political reasons. In particular, those of a historical bent have claimed that under Herbert Morrison, London county council built homes all over London that were filled by people who felt grateful and therefore voted Labour. Perhaps they did, but there is no equivalence between Herbert Morrison's LCC and other Labour councils on the one hand and the scoundrels in Westminster on the other.

Labour councils used the powers given them by Parliament to provide decent homes for the homeless and for others who had nowhere decent to live. They did it proudly and in public. There is no comparison between them and the Westminster Tories, who decided, shamefully and in secret, to use their powers unlawfully to deprive homeless families and families living in overcrowded, unhealthy and degrading conditions. They decided not to house them but to deprive them of somewhere decent to live. Instead, they left those families to rot in bed-and-breakfast accommodation and hostels. Worse still, they placed some in asbestos-ridden flats—all to help rig a council election in eight wards.

Those terrible decisions were taken by rich and powerful Tories. The victims were homeless families, who are usually poor. Sometimes they include men, but most homeless families consist of a poor woman and the children of that poor woman. What a life for those children—often having to cook, eat, sleep, wash, live, play and try to grow up in one rotten, shabby, infested and overcrowded room. Those children should have been helped by those in authority, but in Westminster they were not. Instead, the Tories ordered council officials to be mean and nasty to the homeless children.

Above the doorway of the Old Bailey, these words, taken from the Book of Psalms, are carved in stone:

"Defend the children of the poor and punish the wrongdoers."

The Tories have reversed those ancient laws, which should guide the conduct of mankind. The Tories now defend the wrongdoers who punished the children of the poor. Their party and Government have sunk so low that they are beyond redemption. The only thing that they can do now is go—and go before they do more harm to more homeless families in our country.

4.25 pm

The Secretary of State for the Environment (Mr. John Gummer): I beg to move, to leave out from "House" to the end of the Question and to add instead thereof:

"notes the publication of the Public Interest Report made by Westminster City Council's appointed auditor, Westminster City Council Audit of Accounts 1987–88 to 1994–1995; approves the action of the Government in insisting on the correct legal process; endorses the independence of the auditor; commends the Government's refusal to prejudge or condemn individuals before the conclusion of the due process of law; respects the view that parliamentary privilege is a powerful weapon for the protection of individuals and should not be used to provide cover for party political attacks; and notes that Westminster City Council provides high quality services at a value for money price.".

I will begin by addressing the remarks by the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) concerning the auditor's inquiry. The auditor to Westminster city council issued his note of provisional findings and views on objections made under section 17(3) of the Local Government Finance Act 1982 on 13 January 1994. They were issued only to the parties to the objections and to the council. The auditor also made a short public statement summarising the process and his findings, which were that 10 former council members and officers should be surcharged—one of whom, Dr. Michael Dutt, has since died—and that seven former council members and officers, including Dr. Dutt, should be disqualified from office.

The auditor invited those to whom his provisional findings were adverse to show cause why he should not take action against them. The respondents requested an oral hearing, which was set for October 1994, to allow the parties to instruct counsel and to prepare their submissions. The full hearing lasted 34 days and was completed on 7 February 1995.

The auditor published his final decision and made a public interest report on 9 May 1996. He has issued a certificate in the sum of £31,677,064 to each of Mr. Graham England, Mr. Peter Hartley, Mr. Paul Hayler, Mr. Bill Phillips, Dame Shirley Porter and Councillor David Weeks, under section 20 of the 1982 Act. They are jointly and severally liable for that amount.

The auditor decided not to uphold the objections in respect of Councillor Judith Warner, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South–West (Mr. Legg) and Mr. Robert Lewis.

Those individuals surcharged have 28 days from the date that they receive the auditor's statement of reasons to appeal against his decision to the High Court. I understand that a notice of appeal was lodged yesterday evening.

In my reply to a private notice question from my right hon. Friend the Member for City of London and Westminster, South (Mr. Brooke) on Thursday 9 May, I made it clear that I was not going to prejudge the outcome of the appeals process that will follow. That remains my position. It would not be right, proper or decent to condemn people until the courts have had their say.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gummer: I will in a moment, but not now.

I remind the House that Her Majesty's Opposition repeatedly pressed the Government to condemn the 10 former council members and officers to whom the auditor's provisional findings were adverse. If we had followed their advice, the House would have passed judgment on three people in respect of whom objections were not subsequently upheld.

It is not sufficient for Labour Members to defend themselves by suggesting that the auditor was not complimentary about these individuals. Labour Members have stigmatised these individuals as guilty of charges of a most serious kind—charges that the auditor's final report does not uphold. Labour Members, in their rush to judgment, have offended one of our most elementary rules, and one that lies at the heart of the English legal system. They were so concerned to press party political advantage that they did not mind whom they condemned or whether those they attacked had had a chance to put their side of the case.

Mr. Prentice: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Gummer: I shall give way in a moment—other hon. Members have been able to put their cases clearly, and I wish to do the same.

In particular, the Labour party has condemned an elected Member of the House. It has condemned him unheard for allegations from which the auditor has since resiled. No one can consider that to be treatment in the best traditions of the House—indeed, it is the sort of behaviour that Labour Members would be the first to condemn in others.

[Mr. Gummer]

Let me make it absolutely clear to hon. Members that, if the auditor's findings are upheld by the courts, I will not hesitate to condemn those responsible. If that condemnation were to come, it would be the more weighty and the more serious because it would be arrived at after the due process of law. Some hon. Members seem to be having difficulty understanding the legal position. Therefore, I shall refer to section 20 of the Local Government Finance Act 1982—a Tory Act.

Mr. Bruce Grocott (The Wrekin): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Gummer: I shall give way in a moment.

The Act provides that, if it appears to the auditor that a loss has been incurred or a deficiency has been caused by the wilful misconduct of any person, he shall certify that the amount of the loss or deficiency is due from that person, and he may recover the amount of loss or deficiency that he has identified.

The same section provides that any person who is aggrieved by an auditor's decision under the section may appeal against the decision to the court. In the case of a decision to certify that an amount is due from any person, the court may confirm, vary or quash the decision, and give any certificate that the auditor could have given. Similarly, in the case of a decision not to certify that an amount is due from any person, the court may confirm or quash it and give any certificate that the auditor could have given.

It is perfectly clear that anything I say about the auditor's report could be prejudicial to appeals under section 20, and it is no good hon. Members pretending otherwise, as it happens to be true. The fact is that any prejudgment I make is a prejudgment of a case that we knew to be likely, and now know to be certain.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Gummer: The hon. Member for Nottingham, East (Mr. Heppell), who was not present on the last occasion, will not want to miss what I have to say before I give way.

That means any appeals. It does not refer only to appeals that have already been announced by those against whom the auditor has found, but also to any possible appeals by the original objectors against the auditor's failure to confirm some of his interim findings. Labour Members should recognise this point, and stop trying to make party political points at this stage in the process.

Any statement about this case could be prejudicial not only to the case of Dame Shirley Porter and those who have been criticised in the report and against whom the objections have been upheld, but also to any case that might be taken against the auditor for not including those whom he had previously criticised. If I were to comment on what the auditor has said, I would prejudice the case against either side in this matter. That is why the only comment that I have made—

Mr. Grocott *rose—*

Mr. John Gunnell (Morley and Leeds, South) *rose—*

Mrs. Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough) *rose—*

Mr. Gummer: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman—he need not worry.

I have commented on this issue only by carefully pointing out one thing. Previously, the House was invited to criticise people because they were criticised by the auditor in his preliminary report. If the House had done so, it would have behaved in a way that subsequently, I think the Labour party would agree, would have been a mistake. That is the only thing I have said, and I believe, because I have taken legal advice, that it is not prejudicial. I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Gunnell: Is the Secretary of State trying to tell us that we cannot repeat the comments that Mr. Magill, the auditor, makes about the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South–West (Mr. Legg) because we might then find that the original objectors are taking the auditor to court on account of the fact that he has not included the hon. Gentleman among those whom he is surcharging and taking action against?

Is that what the Secretary of State is trying to tell us? Is that why he says that, although the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West is unlikely to appeal against not being included in these charges, we cannot use those quotes in which the auditor states the things that are known by that hon. Gentleman, simply because we may put the auditor, Mr. Magill, in a difficult position by so doing?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Geoffrey Lofthouse): Order. Before the Secretary of State answers that question, I point out that interventions must be brief and to the point, and not mini-speeches.

Mr. Gummer: I think that what I said was clear: that if I, as Secretary of State, make a comment on the report, it may—indeed might well—be held to be prejudicial to the interests not only of one side, but of any other side that might want to bring a case to court. That is all I am saying. The hon. Gentleman must judge with his conscience what he should say. I am merely saying that the legal position is clear regarding comments made by me, as Secretary of State, in a matter of this kind.

Mr. Grocott *rose—*

Mrs. Helen Jackson *rose—*

Mr. Gordon Prentice *rose—*

Mr. Gummer: The hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) rose earlier.

Mr. Prentice: Is it not an uncontrovertible, recorded fact that section 20 of the 1982 Act allows the district auditor to make a finding of guilt, and that individuals are appealing against that finding of guilt? Will the Minister concede that the six named individuals are guilty?

Mr. Gummer: What the Minister will repeat is that, if I make a comment about this statement, that will be prejudicial in any appeal that may be made on either side. Nothing would please me better than to be able to make a series of statements about this matter, but, when one is attempting to be responsible about such matters, one must take the best advice there is. If I were seeking the best advice, the hon. Gentleman would not be among my first choices.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Gummer: So that Opposition Members may have something more to say, I will give them a bit more on this subject, because it is important.

First, there is the risk of prejudicing a court case that might take place from any angle, in any circumstances. Secondly, there is the issue of the use of the privileges of the House of Commons. When I answered the private notice question by my right hon. Friend the Member for City of London and Westminster, South, I made the point that we all have a serious problem when considering the nature of the privilege of Parliament.

We are able to say in the House things that cannot put us into court. We have that privilege to protect those who need the protection of the House, so that we can stand up and say things that will lead to proper and due process of law. We know that, in this circumstance, there is to be proper and due process of law. I believe that the use of the privileges of the House of Commons in those circumstances—

Mr. Mike Hall (Warrington, South): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is the Secretary of State saying that he cannot confirm that the district auditor has found the six councillors guilty of misconduct?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order for the Chair. The Secretary of State is responsible for his own speech.

Mr. Gummer: The privilege of Parliament, under which we all speak, demands a degree of reticence from us that is of considerable importance if the House is to live up to its best traditions.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Gummer: I shall be happy to give way, but I want to finish my thought. I am sure that the House is following me with great care. The reason—[HON. MEMBERS: "Waffling."] If hon. Members think that I am waffling when talking about privilege, they have lost their usual reputation for caring about privilege.

We are able to use privilege as a defence on behalf of those who would otherwise not be able to prosecute their case or to maintain their innocence. In this instance, there is to be a court hearing, as a result of which we shall know the innocence or guilt of the persons concerned. Those who say that they know already about innocence or guilt are prejudging the decision of the court when the appeal takes place.

Mr. Robert N. Wareing (Liverpool, West Derby): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I hope that it is a genuine point of order.

Mr. Wareing: There are some who might feel that the Secretary of State is implying that we cannot reasonably comment on the district auditor's report because the matter is sub judice. If it were sub judice, Mr. Deputy Speaker, surely you would not have allowed the debate to have taken place.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: It may be helpful if I advise the House that, after careful consideration, Madam Speaker is satisfied that the sub judice rule of the House, which is drawn much narrower than the terms of the rule commonly used, does not apply in this instance. The rule makes it clear that it comes into effect when a matter first comes before a civil court. That is

"from the time that the case has been set down for trial or otherwise brought before the court."

I understand that, in this instance, an appeal has been lodged, but the issue has not yet been set down for trial. In these circumstances, the House rule does not apply at this stage.

Mr. Gummer: So the situation is clear, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The issue is not sub judice at this moment, but it will become sub judice the moment that the case is set down for hearing.

The Secretary of State's position is simple. He is asked by all precedents not to say anything in the meantime that is prejudicial to the case when it comes before the court. I do not believe that it is in the best traditions of the House to depart from precedents. It does not seem sensible either for a Secretary of State to prejudice a case during a short period when he would not be allowed, by the rules of the House, to prejudice it once a date is set down for hearing. To do so would put me in an intolerable moral position, and not one in which I am prepared to be put.

Mr. Grocott: The Secretary of State says strongly that it would be wrong to make any comments on anything until a final conclusion is reached. He says also that we are in grave danger of infringing or abusing the historic traditions of the House. Am I to take it that the right hon. Gentleman condemns unreservedly the Prime Minister's decision to condemn Monklands councillors, using the privilege of the House in advance of the completion of an inquiry?

Mr. Gummer: The quotation did not give much strength to that argument. I say clearly to the hon. Gentleman that, if the Secretary of State for the Environment were to pass comment on the Westminster case, I am advised that, without question, it would be prejudicial to any case that came before the courts. I would therefore be acting contrary to my duty to the House, and as a Minister, if I were to comment. I have no intention of doing so.

There is a third element that we must take seriously before we deal with the rest of the matters that are before us.

Mr. David Nicholson: I concur entirely with what my right hon. Friend has been saying so far. However, are there not two conclusions to be drawn from the Opposition's desire to raise these matters at this stage? First, there is probably a case to examine the prejudices in the local government finance system that supports Westminster but has supported also Lambeth, Southwark and other inner London boroughs. More particularly, should not the House be extraordinarily reluctant to return to local government the powers and resources to build council houses wherever it wishes? Those powers were sometimes part of a gerrymandering political and electoral system.

Mr. Gummer: It would not be sensible or proper for me to comment on those matters. It is true, however, that the issue before us is not confined to whether we prejudice

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a case for either side. If it comes before the courts—and certainly it will come before them as a result of the actions of one side—it is not only a matter of the proper use of privilege: there is a third consideration. It is not unreasonable to judge people by the way in which they treat others in circumstances where those others have still to take a case to court. It would be much more sensible, and would give much more weight to judgment, if we were to wait until judgment had been made.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Gummer: I shall bring my remarks to an end on this matter, because I want the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras to listen to them. I believe that the weight of the hon. Gentleman's condemnation would be much greater if he waited until that condemnation were, if it were, upheld by a court of law. No court of law has yet heard the case. It would be better for us all—

Ms Hilary Armstrong (North-West Durham): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Gummer: Of course.

Ms Armstrong: I wonder whether the Secretary of State will take himself back to the Widdicombe report. The report contained a recommendation that the Government introduce a system of appeals into the process of audit. I shall read a couple of lines from paragraph 6.9 of the Government's response to the report. The Government are commenting on the recommendation to include the power of appeal within procedures. The passage is:

"Neither the Audit Commission nor the auditors would welcome this change of role. Furthermore, the Government does not consider the Commission, made up as it is of a balance of local authority members and other interests, to be an appropriate body to initiate legal action against particular councils' decisions . . . The auditor must assemble the evidence, and is best placed to decide whether a case exists to invoke statutory sanctions. Transferring the responsibilities from the auditor would reduce his standing and authority, thereby lessening rather than enhancing his effectiveness. The Government have therefore decided that responsibility for taking action under sections 19 and 20"—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady is making a very long intervention.

Mr. Gummer: The Government made that decision, and presented a clause to the House that included the right of those who were so announced to go to court on appeal. That is precisely what we are talking about. That which the hon. Lady says makes no difference.

Ms Margaret Hodge (Barking) *rose—*

Mr. Gummer: I shall not give way, because I want to get on. I have some interesting things to say about Islington. I have no doubt that the hon. Lady will be interested in them.

It seems that we would all be much better employed ensuring that the due process of law can be carried through, that it is not prejudiced and that we do not use the privilege of this place to prejudge a court case for party political reasons.

Ms Hodge: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Gummer: No. I shall give way to the hon. Lady later in my speech, when she will have more reason to intervene.

Mr. Tracey: In general terms, can my right hon. Friend inform the House whether a district auditor is bound by legal precedent, and whether the precedent of any other decisions by district auditors should in any way affect the one involved in the current hearing?

Mr. Gummer: I am not a lawyer, so I take advice on such matters. As I understand it, the auditor acts as an auditor and not as a lawyer. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] The Opposition have given themselves away. They find it odd for me to say that the auditor acts as auditor, but throughout the discussion of these matters, they have been talking as if the auditor were acting as a judge or a legal figure. I am suggesting that he acts as auditor, and that it is for the judge before whom the case will be heard to act as a judge.

Mr. Clive Betts (Sheffield, Attercliffe): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Gordon Prentice: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Gummer: I shall not give way to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Attercliffe (Mr. Betts). The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras gave way hardly at all. It would be more sensible to follow the case, as I have suggested.

The position is very clear. It would be wrong for any of us to prejudge the case, not because we are partial to one side or the other, but precisely because both sides could be prejudiced by anything that we might say.

Mr. Betts: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Ms Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Gummer: No.

Having left the auditor's report on one side, the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras repeated his concept that, somehow or other, the standard spending assessment system was rigged, and had distributed central Government grant in favour of Westminster city council. He did so on the basis that, having said it so often, he pretends that everybody knows it. If one continues saying something as often as one can without examining the facts, it is easy to say that everyone knows it.

It would be reasonable and dispassionate, however, if we went through the allegations carefully and saw whether they carried any weight. The hon. Gentleman tends to portray Westminster as a leafy suburb devoid of any problems—

Mr. Grocott: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Secretary of State has repeated that it would be quite

inappropriate and wrong for him, in his high office, to make any comment that might be prejudicial, yet the amendment to our motion, which is in his name, specifically congratulates Westminster city council on the services it provides. The amendment states:

"Westminster City Council provides high quality services at a value for money price."

How can the Secretary of State claim that he is not making judgments, when his amendment does just that?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman knows full well that the Secretary of State is responsible for his own speech, but I have already made a ruling—which I hope the House heard clearly—in respect of the scope of the debate. I have already explained to the House that at this stage debate is not prejudicial to any court hearing.

Mr. Gummer: It is with very great care that the amendment that stands in my name and the names of my right hon. Friends refers to the provision of services by Westminster city council in 1996, or at this moment. That is not prejudicial to anything, because the case before the courts refers to events which, if they occurred, were some time ago, and were unconnected with the amendment before the House. The hon. Gentleman knew that, and that is why it is a pity that he raised the matter again.

The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras referred to Westminster as if it were a leafy suburb devoid of any of the problems that characterise other inner-London boroughs. The hon. Gentleman is living in an entirely different world. I imagine that he is trying to catch up with the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull, East (Mr. Prescott), and clearly spends far too much time with his new found middle-class status.

The real Westminster is very different from the well-to-do picture that the hon. Gentleman paints. In his speeches in the House over many months, he has never mentioned north Paddington, Queen's park or Church street; he discusses only Belgravia and Mayfair. Evidently, new Labour talks about only certain parts of Westminster.

Last week, I invited the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras to take a trip with me. I suggested that we might visit all the long-sea outfalls of the United Kingdom to see the effect of water privatisation. The hon. Gentleman did not take me up on that, so I shall propose a shorter trip—one from Westminster to Pimlico. If he would accompany me, he would pass the Peabody Trust's Horseferry road and Old Pye street estates, the Grosvenor and Regency estates, the Millbank estate and the Lillington gardens estate. He would see the estates of some of the most difficult parts of London.

The Government base our assessment not on the hon. Member's general comments, but on the facts. More than 100 languages are spoken in Westminster's schools, and 5 per cent. of Westminster's pupils are refugees. Of course, I am not referring to the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw), who moved to Westminster in order to take advantage of its fine services.

Mr. George Foulkes (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Has the Secretary of State notified my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn about his intention to launch that disgraceful attack?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The Chair knows nothing about that. How the Chair can rule on that, I just do not know.

Mr. Gummer: I am happy to say to the hon. Member for Blackburn that, if he does not live in Westminster, but sends his children to school there, I am sorry that he does not send his children to school in the borough in which he lives.

In Westminster, 17 per cent. of pupils come from homeless families. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Newham, North–West (Mr. Banks) should listen to the facts, as they might help him to compare his own borough with Westminster.

In Westminster, 45 per cent. of pupils have English as a second language, compared with a national average of below 10 per cent. So when the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras says how ridiculous it is that Westminster gets sufficient resources to deal with those problems, he fails to recognise that 45 per cent. of pupils there have to be taught English. The turnover the pupils at a school such as St. James and St. Michael is 109 per cent. The turnover at Hallfield school is 59 per cent. So let us recognise the difficulties with which Westminster—along with many other London boroughs—has to deal.

Mr. Tony Banks (Newham, North–West): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Gummer: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman in a moment. I look forward to it.

Westminster has a higher density of population than Hackney, Islington, Lambeth or Southwark; a higher proportion of people likely to be from ethnic minorities than Hackney, Islington, Lambeth or Southwark; a higher proportion of people living in overcrowded accommodation than Islington, Lambeth or Southwark; a higher proportion of elderly people over 85; and a higher proportion of elderly people living alone than Hackney, Islington, Lambeth or Southwark.

Therefore, whatever else can be said about it, Westminster—like other London boroughs—clearly requires particular help with its heavy responsibilities and special difficulties. The cheap jibes of the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras suggest that he knows only what he can see of Westminster from the House of Commons, and that does great damage to his reputation as a London Member.

Mr. Banks: I remind the Secretary of State that Westminster also has a higher proportion of bent councillors that Lambeth, Islington or Southwark. I note that he did not mention Newham. Were Newham confronting the problems that he has just read out, these would seem like halcyon days.

Will the right hon. Gentleman also explain why Westminster found it necessary to move large numbers of its homeless people into the London borough of Newham while keeping its own properties empty, waiting to sell them to potential Tory voters?

Mr. Gummer: The reason why I made no comparisons with Newham was that I was making comparisons with

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inner-London boroughs that were adjacent or opposite to Westminster in order to be as fair as possible, and I shall continue to do so.

Mr. John Fraser (Norwood): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Gummer: No. I will give way later to the hon. Gentleman, whom I know well and know to be very interested in London's problems, but I want to continue making what I consider an important point in the context of my argument with the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras.

The hon. Gentleman has said that, for the purposes of grant distribution, the Government treat Westminster as the fourth most deprived place in Britain. That is not true. It is true that Westminster comes fourth on the social index, which is part of the SSA methodology, but it has a much lower score on the other indicator of deprivation, the economic index, on which it comes 64th.

The five indicators that make up the social index are: shared or non-permanent accommodation; overcrowded accommodation; households in rented purpose-built flats; residents born outside the European Community, the old Commonwealth and the United States of America; and homelessness acceptances. Those are the criteria against which every council is measured, in exactly the same way, and it is on those criteria that Westminster is seen to have the problems it has. If the hon. Gentleman wishes them to be changed, I hope that at some future time—obviously, he will want to think about it—he will tell us which of them ought not to be included.

The hon. Gentleman has advanced another argument. He has argued that Westminster ought to receive less money because it is currently benefiting from some special treatment by the Government. I have examined the position very carefully; I do not think that it is possible to act in that way, and, if I thought it possible, I would not think it right.

If the hon. Gentleman had right on his side, he would have to prove the following. First, he would need to show that the system applied to Westminster is different from that applied to other local authorities. Secondly, he would need to explain why, if the current system is rigged in its favour, Westminster did better under the last Labour Government than it does under the present Government. If we have rigged the system, it is surprising that we have rigged it so that Westminster does less well than it did when the hon. Member for Blackburn was advising the last Labour Government.

I note that the Labour party tries to cover that up. I shall repeat it, so that *Hansard* can record it again. If Westminster is being supported by some unsuitable activity, why does it do less well under the current system than it did under the system used by that earlier Government?

Thirdly, the hon. Gentleman would need to explain why his doughty champions, the Labour leaders of the local authority associations, are not demanding a radical overhaul of the system. Fourthly, he would need to quote significant expert opinion supporting his case. Finally, he would need to promise major changes to the SSA methodology in the event of a Labour Government. If the position is as the hon. Gentleman states, he ought to say publicly that, were there ever a Labour Government, they would change it, and he ought to say how they would change it.

Mr. Michael Stephen (Shoreham): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Gummer: I want to make some more comparisons; then I will give way.

The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras has spent two years working on his argument—the same argument as I have heard throughout the two years during which we have been discussing the matter. Let us see how he is doing. Has he shown that the system applied to Westminster is different from those applied to other local authorities? No, he has not. He cannot, because the same formula is applied to every local authority in the country. The system is completely open.

Has the hon. Gentleman explained why, if the current system is rigged in its favour, Westminster did better under the last Labour Government than it does under the present Government? No, he has not. *[Interruption.]* I think that the hon. Gentleman needs to listen to this. He knows that his own local authority, Camden, is treated more generously in comparison with Westminster under the present Government than it was under the last Labour Government.

In other words, under the system employed by that Government, the hon. Gentleman's authority did less well than it does now, while Westminster did better. There was a different system, which was better for Westminster and less good for Camden.

Ms Armstrong: Why was that information not included in a parliamentary answer to a question asked earlier this year? A Minister was asked

"what was the total sum allocated to each English local authority from central Government resources in each year since 1974."—[*Official Report*, 15 February 1996; Vol. 271, c. 659.]

He replied that the requested information was not available before 1990-91.

Mr. Gummer: The reason is that the question was an entirely different one. It asked about totalities; I have been using comparators. I have said clearly that I am comparing two local authorities. The hon. Lady clearly has it wrong.

The amount that went to Westminster under the Labour party's system was proportionately more than the amount that went to Camden, while the amount that went to Camden was proportionately less than the amount that went to Westminster. If that is so, it cannot be true that the Government are fiddling the figures. It seems to me that the only fiddling of figures was done by the Labour party, which did it so badly that, when it left office, the system it had produced would not stand up.

The reason is simple. Labour was able to change the arrangements for one authority as against another, while our system makes it illegal and impossible to change the arrangements for one authority: we can only change them for a whole class of authorities. That is why the comparison must be made by reference to a class of authorities rather than a single authority.

The whole system would have to be rigged—which could not be done without all the Labour councils pointing out that it had been done. The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras is the only person who believes that it was done.

Mr. Stephen: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, far from being imposed arbitrarily by central Government, the SSA methodology is worked out in careful consultation with the local authority associations, and that, if any change were made, there would be howls of protest from Labour authorities which would lose? Will he also confirm that the people of Scotland and Wales, which are represented mostly by Opposition Members, receive far more subsidy from central Government than anyone living in England?

Mr. Gummer: Such issues are discussed regularly with representatives of all the local authorities, all of which are dominated by Labour, all of which are involved in any change in SSAs, and all of which disagree with one another on every individual case because they want what will help them in particular. I understand that, but we discussed these matters in great detail, which is why so many changes have been made.

Mr. Peter Hardy (Wentworth) *rose—*

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) *rose—*

Mr. Gummer: I want to make an important point. We introduced other measures of deprivation into the index, including the problems of unemployment, specifically because the Labour-controlled local authority organisations wanted us to.

Mr. John McWilliam (Blaydon): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gummer: No.

The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras has failed to produce any evidence that hordes of Labour leaders are demanding changes of the sort he wants. That is probably why he cannot make expert opinion support his case. I know that he would not expect experts to agree with him, because he has said that he does not always agree with them. The hon. Gentleman has said that he never felt compelled to agree with experts. But what do the experts say? They say that this is the most sophisticated system in Europe to give fair and equal treatment to the whole country.

If the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras believes what he says, would he not have got up two years ago, a month ago, or even last Thursday, and said, "We propose a radical change in the share-out system." He did not do that; he left it to the hon. Member for North–West Durham (Ms Armstrong) to say what she thought about it.

The hon. Lady told the *Local Government Chronicle* that she would not like to promise major changes at this stage. I am glad about that. *[Interruption.]* I think that, in the same article, she did not promise any radical change, but presumably she agrees with her hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras, who said that this is a major scandal of the Government rigging the arrangements.

If the Opposition believe that, they would promise change, but they do not, because they know that the allegation is untrue. It is only in the House that they can get any vestige of support for their allegation, because they do not have support from the experts or from their friends in local authorities. They have no support from the facts, and they do not believe it themselves.

A few weeks ago, the Audit Commission published a wealth of information comparing the performance of every council in the country. I considered that it was worth looking at Westminster council in 1996, because I thought that the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras would attack that council in his speech. He attacked not just the council that was reported on by the auditor, but Westminster council in general. Indicator after indicator shows that Westminster city council provides a service far superior to that of its closest Labour neighbours—Camden, Hammersmith and Fulham, Islington, and Southwark.

It is worth putting the record straight. I hope that hon. Members will agree that one of a local authority's most important jobs is the collection of council tax. Poor collection means less to spend on services and higher tax bills. According to the Audit Commission, Westminster collected 88.8 per cent. of its council tax in 1994-95.

Mr. Betts: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Gummer: No. I want to finish my speech, and there is not much time in which to do it.

That compares with a collection rate of 86 per cent. in Hammersmith and Fulham, and in Camden, while Islington managed only 82 per cent., and Southwark managed only 79.9 per cent. Despite having the best collection rate, Westminster spent less per dwelling than Camden, Islington, and Hammersmith and Fulham on collecting the money. It takes longer to get a decision on a planning application for those who live under Labour.

Mr. Betts *rose—*

Mr. Gummer: No, I will not give way. I want the hon. Gentleman to listen to these figures, because he might learn from Westminster.

Westminster decided on 74 per cent. of household planning applications within eight weeks. Southwark managed 65 per cent., Hammersmith and Fulham 63 per cent. and Camden only 53 per cent. Islington said that it managed 48 per cent., but the Audit Commission has expressed doubts about that council's figures. Even if Islington's figures are correct, it is still the slowest council in London, and the second slowest nationally, in deciding on household planning applications.

I thought that it was worth while looking to see how Islington performed on the council tax. I wondered whether it would be a good idea to consider what would happen to tax throughout the country if every council got the same Government grant per head as Islington. I took the views of the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras on Westminster and transferred them next door to Islington.

Mr. Terry Lewis (Worsley): Oh, very clever of you.

Mr. Gummer: It was not bad. It took some time, but we have done it. I thought it was also worth while to appreciate that Islington—

Mr. Foulkes: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I can find no reference in the motion or in the amendment to Islington. I understand that it is in order to make passing references to matters that are not in the Order Paper, but the Minister is not doing that: he is rehearsing a whole volume, and I think that you should ask him to sit down.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I remind the Secretary of State that the amendment states:

"Westminster City Council provides high quality services at a value for money price."

It would be advisable and to the benefit of the House if the Minister would return to that.

Mr. Gummer: Of course I agree, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I think you will agree that to prove whether there is value for money, it is not unreasonable to compare how ratepayers' money is spent in neighbouring authorities. It is a sort of comparison shopping, as to which provides the better value for money. Value for money is a precise comparator, and it is the one I wish to use. Islington is not dissimilar to Westminster, but it gets more Government grant. If authorities received the same rate support grant per head as Islington, most of them would be able to give a rebate.

Mr. Foulkes: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I tried the Minister's tactics about 10 years ago, and Mr. Speaker rightly ruled me out of order. One can make only passing references to certain issues, but the Secretary of State is dealing with Islington, and comparing it—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The Chair will decide what is in order.

Mr. Gummer: Westminster council has a lower rate support grant per head than Islington, and is doing better than that council. The Opposition do not want me to speak about Islington, for a good reason. It is a dreadful council, and performs appallingly.

If I were to go through the comparisons, Labour would be extremely embarrassed, but the one thing that I shall not do is to draw attention to, refer to or comment upon the internal report on what has been happening in Islington's social services department and elsewhere. That would be entirely wrong, and I would not do it. Therefore, one ought to rely on the figures. That is what I am doing, and it is quite clear that Westminster does much better than Islington, although it has special difficulties.

In Westminster, 99 per cent. of vital social services equipment costing less than £1,000 is provided within three weeks of assessment. Camden manages 75 per cent., and Southwark only 60 per cent. Hammersmith and Fulham says that it managed 71 per cent., while Islington says that it managed 60 per cent., but again the Audit Commission has its doubts about the figures provided by those last two councils.

Children with special educational needs wait longer to be statemented elsewhere in London. In Westminster, 70 per cent. of special educational needs statements—*[Interruption.]* I know that Labour Members do not like Westminster comparisons, but it is time that they listened to them, because they do not understand.

In Westminster, 70 per cent. of special education needs statements were prepared within six months. Camden managed 70 per cent. as well. Islington managed 50 per cent., Southwark 32 per cent., and Hammersmith and Fulham only 29 per cent. The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras built himself up to a fury at the end of his speech, but I remind him that, without any allegations, statements or standpoints, in Westminster, 70 per cent. of children most in need were statemented within six months, and that, in Hammersmith and Fulham, 29 per cent of such children were statemented.

All the indicators I have referred to and many more, if I had time to cover them, show how well Westminster does compared with authorities run by the Labour party. People do not pay more for those high-quality services. They have the lowest council tax bills—£295 at band D. That is £430 less than Hammersmith and Fulham, £436 less than Southwark, £484 less than Camden, and a staggering £558 less than Islington, a council that has a higher RSG than Westminster. The issue is therefore clear: people get a better service at a lower cost.

In conclusion—[Hon. Members: "Hooray."] Labour Members want me to stop because it is hurtful and embarrassing to them. The more the figures come out, the more the comparisons are shown and the more we see what it is like under Labour, the more Labour Members are embarrassed and the more the public recognise that that embarrassment is caused by what is happening now. That shows why Labour Members have to pretend that there is a plot to support Westminster. Otherwise, they could not explain away how bad Labour local government is in London.

Ms Glenda Jackson: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gummer: I will not give way to the hon. Lady.

In London, Labour councils are charging more and delivering less—we see that on the facts of the case. The reason is that Conservative councils run their business more efficiently, and therefore are more able to help people most in need.

Before anyone starts talking about homelessness, I point out to the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras that the rough sleepers initiative, which I have promoted, pressed and protected, is one of this country's most successful operations, and that it has dramatically reduced the number of people who sleep rough, it has found homes for a large number of them, and it is widely supported by organisations and voluntary movements which are not Government supporters, but which believe that our approach to homelessness has been right, generous, determined and continued.

If the Labour party spent its time trying to explain to the country why, today, Labour councils cost people more and deliver less, it would be in a better position to condemn, if and when a court has made its decision. I will not condemn in advance, but if the court were to

find that any of the people who have been named are guilty of what they have been named for, I would be the first to condemn. My condemnation will be weighty because it has waited for the evidence of a court of law.

5.24 pm

Mr. Robert N. Wareing (Liverpool, West Derby): Some of us must feel speechless after that exhibition of sanctimonious gobbledegook from the Secretary of State for the Environment. He tells us that he does not want to prejudice the appeal to the court, yet he spent the last part of his speech doing precisely that by defending Westminster city council's record and the crooks who have been found guilty by the district auditor. Why are they appealing?

Mr. James Couchman (Gillingham): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for the hon. Gentleman to refer to the people in Westminster as crooks?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: It is not out of order, but I remind hon. Members that they should be moderate in their expressions.

Mr. Couchman: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment has been at great pains to tell us throughout his lengthy speech, these people have recourse to the courts of law, they have not been found guilty in the courts of law and, therefore, they should not be called crooks. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. So far, the debate has been in order or the occupant of the Chair would have ruled that it was not.

Mr. Skinner: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As mention has been made of whether it is parliamentary to use the word "crooks", may I remind you that, in my time as a Member of Parliament, Tory Ministers and Tory Back Benchers have several times accused people in Labour local government, some involved in surcharge, some not, of being crooks and that they were never once pulled up by the occupant of the Chair. The Secretary of State for the Environment has never apologised for it.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Hon. Members will not have been pulled up because they were not out of order. I have ruled in a similar way.

Mr. Wareing: It is strange to hear such interventions from a Tory Member. I wonder what Lady Porter and the crooks in Westminster are appealing against if it is not the fact that they have been found guilty. I have never heard of anyone appealing against being found not guilty.

I was intrigued by the comments of the hon. Member for Gillingham (Mr. Couchman) because, following the statement of the Secretary of State for the Environment last Thursday, he said that

"it is a matter for grave concern for one person to act as investigator, prosecutor, judge, jury and hangman, and to have the power to exact an unlimited fine in penalty".—[*Official Report*, 9 May 1996; Vol. 277, c. 370.]

Where was the hon. Gentleman on 14 February 1986 when my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Mr. Loyden) introduced the Surcharge and Disqualification of Councillors (Abolition) Bill, which sought to restrict district auditors' powers? My hon. Friend was seeking to ensure that councillors should be removed not by an unelected district auditor, but only by electors—in that case, the electors of Liverpool. However, when Liverpool, Lambeth and, going further back, Clay Cross were being criticised, Conservative Members were not reticent in their criticisms. They did not wait to hear whether Liverpool, Lambeth or Clay Cross were going to appeal to a court of law. They were quick to step in and to attack people, who, far from committing the sins of Lady Porter and the crooks in Westminster, were seeking to help people. Those councils were not pushing poor vulnerable people into asbestos-ridden flats. They were not selling cemeteries for 15p a time. We can argue about whether they were misguided in their financial methods, but they were trying to provide decent homes. They provided more homes between 1983 and 1987 than probably any other local authority in Britain.

Mr. Skinner: Is there a distinction to be drawn between what happened under that squalid bunch in Westminster and what happened in Liverpool, Clay Cross and Lambeth? In those three instances, the Labour councillors did what they did openly—there was no secrecy. They wanted the world to know what they were doing. They were involved in a political act because they believed that more money should go to local government. In effect, they were trying to stem the Tory tide of money being taken away from democratically elected councillors and being given to quangos. It was an overt act.

Mr. Wareing: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. They built good solid homes, bungalows for elderly people, sports centres for the youth and the first municipal park to be built in an urban area for decades.

Of course, the Labour party did not excuse misdemeanours at the time and, although I did not agree with everything he said in his speech to the Labour party conference at Bournemouth, we should contrast the courage of Neil Kinnock with the mealy-mouthed words of the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister.

How low the Tory party has sunk. There are one or two honourable exceptions. After the publication of the provisional auditor's report, the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath) said that he would condemn the council. He saw that this was the biggest outrage facing a Conservative Government over the acts of Tory local authorities. There were even a few honourable exceptions within Westminster city council. Councillors such as Patricia Kirwin, Tony Prendergast and Angela Killick were willing to give evidence. They did not have parliamentary privilege, but they condemned what was being done and gave some of the most important evidence to the auditor. Who defends them from the Tories?

There was a time, perhaps during the days of Harold Macmillan, when Tory Ministers would not have tabled an amendment such as that before us today defending a council so rotten in its attitude to decent yet poor people. My friends in Liverpool who suffered the surcharge of £106,000 apiece were not millionaires like Lady Porter. In the main, they were poor, honourable and decent

[Mr. Wareing]

people who wanted to do good for those whom they were elected to represent. They were not getting anything through the till. They were certainly not benefiting from any fiddles from a Tory Government. In fact, they took the actions they did precisely because they were being starved of funds by the Tory Government.

Mr. McWilliam: Will my hon. Friend reflect on the fact that no judge who has to deal with the case would, under any circumstances, be able to set aside the evidence that Westminster council under Lady Porter was deliberately leaving council houses empty, putting council tenants into unfit properties and shifting council tenants into other boroughs for party political purposes? Those are things no judge could challenge because the auditor has produced the evidence of that under the duty laid upon him. Does my hon. Friend think that the correct response from the Government should be a condemnation of corruption in local authorities, regardless of political complexion?

Mr. Wareing: If they were an honourable Government, that is what they would be doing. They would be saying that they want to clean up local government without any view to party political advantage.

I suspect that there has been some collusion between the Secretary of State and the Government and Westminster city council because some of the actions of the council required the sanction of central Government. Certainly, the Government have shown sympathy today for the actions of that recalcitrant local authority.

There is a big difference between the actions of Westminster city council and those of Labour local authorities such as Liverpool which have fallen foul of the auditor. It is the difference between somebody pulled up for speeding and a serial killer. That is the difference between Lady Porter and the local authorities in Liverpool, Lambeth and Clay Cross.

Mr. David Shaw: Will the hon. Gentleman repeat the comment about the serial killer for the media?

Mr. Wareing: Perhaps I should repeat it now because the hon. Gentleman will not be here after the next election, that is for sure.

In the flagship authority of Westminster, the so-called designated sales of property involved no less than 40 per cent. of the total stock—9,360 properties were to be sold off to what Lady Porter believed to be potential Tory voters.

Some Tory Members have said in interventions that whenever council housing was built, that was some form of gerrymandering too. In Liverpool, in the days when the Tory party was at least honourable, even though one might have disagreed with its politics, it built council estates throughout the city. Was that gerrymandering? I was brought up in one such estate. In fact, that policy was good for beer sales because the chairman of the Tory party in Liverpool in those days was also the chairman of Bents brewery. If one wanted to know where a council estate was to be built, one had only to look over the fields and suburbs of the city to see where a public house appeared and one would know that a council estate would soon follow. That is a bit different from the gerrymandering we have seen.

How can the Tories defend this? We had a lengthy speech from the Secretary of State in which he hid behind the idea of sub judice. We were told by you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that this case is not sub judice. These people have been found guilty of a heinous crime against those whom they were elected to represent. When people come to see us in our surgeries, we do not say, "Did you vote for me? Did you vote Labour or Conservative?" When we are elected, we are elected to represent all the people in our constituency. When Tory councillors were elected in the marginal wards in London, they were elected to represent all the people in those wards. They were the councillors to whom people could go, but what was the reward for going? Their reward was to be put into asbestos-ridden flats. Their reward was to have their needs ignored. Their reward was councillors who were guilty of being crooked and have been found to be so by the auditor.

Mr. David Shaw: Serial killers!

Mr. Wareing: I said that there was a difference between what had happened in Liverpool, Clay Cross and Lambeth, and what happened in Westminster: the difference between a serial killer and somebody who drives over the speed limit.

I think back to the arguments in the Chamber 10 years ago, when Tory Members were attacking Labour councils such as Liverpool and Lambeth, and I say to those Tories that the chickens have come home to roost. A Tory council has been found out, and in a very big way. I have as much sympathy with Lady Porter today as Lady Porter had with Liverpool 10 years ago: none.

5.41 pm

Mr. Peter Brooke (City of London and Westminster, South): Once upon a time, my school headmaster told me that in an essay paper on gases that he was reading, one of the candidates had said of a gas that it had the unique capacity for seeking out the crooks and the nannies. It is a pretty conceit, and I am impressed that the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Mr. Wareing) has the same quality—although if I possessed it, I think that I would keep it to myself.

The trigger to this debate was the publication on Thursday of the district auditor's report on Westminster city council, on which I asked my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment a private notice question, although the ostensible grounds for the Opposition changing today's business were the replies given in the House on Thursday by my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State. Conservative Members had been looking forward to an Opposition debate on standards in education, and we shall continue to look forward to it—when the Opposition have sorted themselves out on child benefit, which, incidentally, they will clearly have to do by Friday.

My experience of preparing for this debate afforded me some sympathy for the Opposition's preparation for the Scott debate, although they had twice the amount of time. The pagination of the Magill report was already more extensive than that of Scott, but one's reading needed to be extended to the 642 pages of the Barratt report, given the Leader of the Opposition's somewhat gratuitous reference to asbestos on Thursday, to which I have been unable to detect any reference in Magill.

The Opposition have been accurate in describing the procedure that the district auditor has followed as being the product of a Conservative Act. One Westminster Labour councillor inquired whether I had been the Whip on the Bill, to which I incorrectly assented, confusing the local government Bill in 1980 with the one in 1982. I repeat what I said on Thursday in the House. Although I have been critical of the process, I have not been critical of the district auditor himself.

I mention that because the hon. Member for North–West Durham (Ms Armstrong) said on 6 December 1995 on Second Reading of the Audit (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill that the stories heard about local Members of Parliament vilifying the district auditor and the Audit Commission were a disgrace.

Ms Armstrong: I said that it was a disgrace that Members of Parliament were supporting councillors who were saying that. That statement arose from knowledge that the right hon. Gentleman attended a press conference arranged by a group of Westminster city councillors on 22 February 1995, entitled, "Westminster Conservatives Accuse Auditor of Paralysing Council".

Mr. Brooke: The hon. Lady is perfectly correct about the subject of the press conference and perfectly correct to say that I was responsible for acting as its host. It was a debate about what risk councillors would be under as a result of taking decisions that they had been advised were legal. Indeed, many journalists who attended agreed in private conversation afterwards that it was a reasonable subject to raise. Again, I am talking about the process. Her warning that she might say what she said did not reach me until after the debate, and I do not remotely criticise her for that. I was not present to challenge her at the time and mention it now only to set the record straight.

On the process, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment said in answer to my supplementary question on Thursday that it was not right during such a process to comment on the nature of the process or to suggest that perhaps a different process would be better. I do not dissent from that, but shall remind my right hon. Friend when he returns to the Chamber that he said when we visited these matters after the provisional report:

"I am happy to assure the House that, when the case is complete, I shall consider again the issues that the hon. Gentleman has properly raised to see whether there are changes that I would wish to recommend."—[*Official Report*, 13 January 1994; Vol. 235, c. 347.]

Mr. McWilliam: Since I led for the Opposition in Committee on part III of the 1982 Act, I assure the right hon. Gentleman that he was definitely not the Whip. Does he accept that that Committee had plenty of opportunity to explore those areas of the process about which Lady Porter and others are now complaining? We tabled amendments on those areas, and they were all defeated by the Government.

Mr. Brooke: I am perfectly happy to agree that one can, from time to time, make mistakes in legislation. I do not dissent from that for a moment. On Thursday, my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Cash) alluded to the exoneration of our hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Mr. Legg) and the costs that our hon. Friend had incurred to secure that exoneration. To make the point that the issue is bipartisan, I should say that it is a commonplace in Westminster that the objectors, too, feel that the necessary costs to pursue the process have been excessive.

Far from criticising the district auditor, and having read the narrative element of his report, I think that he has been meticulous. I come to such a judgment with high family standards, for my brother was one of the inspectors on the Department of Trade and Industry report on Harrods, thus earning en série the hostility, first, of Mr. Rowland and then of Mr. Al-Fayed.

Mr. Magill's meticulousness has compared favourably in these matters with that of some of the press. I shall not go into the legal conclusions—not least because I am not a lawyer and they will be tested in the courts—but the Opposition's apparent dismissal of the stage in the High Court has rung oddly given that background briefing by the press has shown that, in the past, a district auditor's judgment has been overturned in the High Court.

No one in the House is more conscious than myself of the cruelty that television can inflict, but I found myself subject to a pang of distaste on Thursday night, when the cameras of the BBC's "Question Time" fastened on the hon. Member for Redcar (Ms Mowlam), the shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, when she was clapping enthusiastically a young man who said that Dame Shirley should go to prison. It would be a mistake for the Opposition, in presuming as they have that Dame Shirley has behaved illegally, to be too careless of the niceties of the law themselves.

The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) was good enough to omit me from his speech today, just as he said that he was sad to include me in his questions on Thursday. I thank him for both. The *Evening Standard* had forewarned me of what the hon. Gentleman had said about me at his press conference, and on Friday, *The Independent* said that Labour sources had been playing the same card on Thursday evening—presumably in the Lobby.

The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras is my parliamentary next-door neighbour, and we get on every bit as well as most neighbours do. Thursday was real-time stuff. Had it been played at a more relaxed pace, I would have leaned over the fence and asked him what on earth he was on about.

In fact the issue had arisen earlier, at the time of the provisional report in January 1994. As is recorded in column 349 of *Hansard* for 13 January 1994, the then shadow Secretary of State for the Environment, the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw), had alluded to the fact that "Panorama" had claimed that I attended a meeting in 1989. I had never concealed the fact that I attended that meeting, although I corrected the hon. Gentleman the next day and pointed out that it actually took place on 3 March 1988. I remark in passing that no reference to that meeting occurs in the Magill narrative.

On 21 January 1994 *The Observer* asked me what other party meetings I had attended. Although I was visiting Manchester that day on Department of National Heritage business, I furnished the paper with a full account. Of a meeting on 13 December 1986, I said that I had no recollection of the agenda, but remembered that its raison d'etre was to look back at the council elections of 1986 and forward to those of 1990.

[Mr. Brooke]

The Observer said that the meeting on 13 December 1986 was highlighted in the district auditor's inquiry as one of a series in which the alleged gerrymandering was developed. In fact, now that the district auditor's report has been published it contains no reference to that meeting. In the absence of such a reference, I cannot tell who placed the spin on the significance of the meeting for *The Observer*.

As for the meeting on 3 March 1988, although *The Guardian* of 15 January 1994 said that the document, "Keeping Westminster Conservative", which underlay the meeting, included details of what it called the £21 million "homes for votes" strategy, in fact, as I said in 1994, the document made only a passing reference to designated sales—half a sentence in a 15-page, closely typed document—and contained no indication that the policy was not city wide, as indeed in overall terms it was. *The Guardian* also said that I was the chairman of my party when Westminster city council set its housing policy. That, too, was not so.

Two days after the article in *The Observer*, when he had seen my statement in that article, on which he had in turn commented to *The Observer*, the hon. Member for Blackburn wrote to me. He reiterated the same questions as *The Observer* had asked me about meetings—questions that I had already answered. The following day, 26 January, as is recorded in column 302 of *Hansard*, the hon. Gentleman referred in the House to an intention to change the electoral base in 18 wards, rather than in the eight to which the Magill report referred. I have long regarded all as being fair in love and war, but there is also some obligation to be attentive to detail.

As for "Panorama", I have twice been interviewed about Northern Ireland by John Ware, a journalist whom I greatly respect—once at great length and once more briefly. For whatever reason, he did not seek to interview me about Westminster city council on either of those programmes.

I apologise for wearying the House with so much detail, but as a consequence of the statement by the shadow Secretary of State to the *Evening Standard* at the press conference, and of his subsequent allusions in the House last Thursday, constituents have been ringing me up to inquire after my welfare or otherwise. Given where the issue arose, the simplest method of response has been to answer those allusions likewise, in the House.

In seeking to widen their net, the Opposition have demonstrated how long they have been out of power. Throughout the relevant period of Mr. Magill's narrative, give or take a few weeks, I was serving in the Treasury. I also spent part of the time as chairman of my party. There is no way in which someone who holds such offices can also keep track of a local authority as complex as Westminster, and of a narrative as dense as that which Mr. Magill unfolded.

It is perhaps an index of that fact that the only references to me that I could detect in the report, in paragraphs 771 and 772, refer to a time when I had gone to the Northern Ireland Office, and a letter was being drafted to me as the local Member of Parliament. Of course, throughout such events one continues to be the local Member of Parliament, and to an inner-city Member, "building stable communities" had an immediate attraction.

At the 1983 general election my constituency had the lowest turnout in the country. In 1987 we moved up eight places, overtaking six seats in or near inner London, and two in Northern Ireland. In 1992 we moved up a further eight seats, overtaking the most inner-city seat in each one of a series of other British cities.

There is something about an inner-city seat that makes for transience—hence the attraction of stable communities. In the High Court the law will take its course on such matters, but the instinct in favour of stable communities was a good place in which to start. Westminster has a disproportionate amount of low-income housing, but also a social cohesion that is immensely worth preserving, which is why people like living here.

Against the housing mix in 1977, when I first became the local Member of Parliament, and that in 1987, when the critical housing committee meeting took place, the logic of designated sales was sensible. If, as the hon. Member for Blackburn said, the policy had a political implication, so did Herbert Morrison's programme, and so did Camden's purchase of private properties between 1965 and 1968 under Labour, under Dr. Ruth Glass's tutelage, which, as vice-chairman of finance, I had to help clear up after my party won in 1968. To neither of those programmes do I attribute illegality.

Mr. Tracey: My right hon. Friend has mentioned the approach in several other cities. Does he share with me some disquiet at the fact that the district auditor investigating Westminster has taken a view completely different from that of the district auditor investigating Birmingham, where similar events happened?

Mr. Brooke: My hon. Friend is right in that observation, but I understand that, according to the process under which such matters are run, district auditors are not subject to precedents set by the behaviour of other district auditors. We still have to ask ourselves, however—

Ms Armstrong: Perhaps I can help the right hon. Gentleman. Allegations were made in the press about Birmingham, and the leader of the council, Councillor Theresa Stewart, invited the auditor in to examine the policy, which no one had said was gerrymandering. In his report the auditor concluded that

"expenditure arising from "Meeting Needs" was lawful",

and that

"the initiative was not primarily an attempt to win votes".

Mr. Brooke: I understand that the treatment in certain wards was not necessarily paralleled elsewhere in the city. But we do not want to have a long argument about such matters; the point that has been established is that the pattern of district auditors' thinking does not have to match on a precedent basis throughout the country.

When I was serving at the Department of National Heritage, the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher), who is an Etonian, once called me a patrician. One of my grandfathers was a clergyman and the other a professional illustrator, and my father was a politician in the House. Pace the Register of Members' Interests, there is no money in any of those callings. However, I would not regard being called a paternalist as an insult, so, the law apart, I have to ask myself whether I regret anything about Mr. Magill's narrative.

Contrary to what the late John Smith said on "Channel 4 News" on the night of 13 January 1994—the date of the provisional report—designated sales were not a method for flooding Westminster with votes from outside Westminster, as the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras half suggested. Nor does the Magill narrative say that that was in fact a consequence of the policy.

Given the inherent stability of parts of Westminster, it would be silly if I had had no reservations about selling off quite so much of the stock, when I wanted the next generation to be able to live here in Westminster, for reasons implicit in Peter Townsend's seminal work on the lives of old people. As I said on Second Reading of the Housing Bill, I had similar concerns about the policies that the Peabody trust was pursuing at the same time.

When eventually I learnt of the human cost in prolonging the time that homeless people spent in short-term accommodation, I was not at ease about that cost. The Leader of the Opposition raised that subject during Prime Minister's questions last Thursday, but the right hon. Gentleman must allow me to say that I hear the distant grinding of double standards.

According to paragraph 60 of the Magill report, in September 1986, Westminster city council had 330 homeless in hotels in Westminster, while other boroughs were using hotels in Westminster for 1,000 homeless—or three times as many people.

In paragraph 383 of the report, there is a moving passage, prior to the critical housing committee meeting in July 1987, in which Shelagh Laslett O'Brien of the Bayswater Coordinating Group addressed the committee. She stated that she wished to respond to the committee's apparent change of policy in transporting homeless families outside the borough—in other words, as an initial act. She stated that one of the positive aspects of the city council's practice had been that families who became homeless in Westminster had not been placed in accommodation outside the borough. It is an irony that other authorities had been placing their homeless in Westminster for years. But it was not simply a matter of location.

Given the Leader of the Opposition's strictures last Thursday about putting the homeless in what he described as

"appalling bed-and-breakfast accommodation",—[*Official Report*, 9 May 1996; Vol. 277, c. 362.]

it is worth recalling that, according to paragraph 825 of the Magill report, on 31 March 1989, six out of the 10 inner London boroughs—Camden, Hammersmith, Islington, Lambeth, Southwark and Tower Hamlets—had more than 1,000 homeless households, ranging in number from 1,164 to 1,690, in temporary accommodation. That is the process that the Leader of the Opposition condemned last Thursday.

On that same day, Westminster had 709 homeless families in the same condition. It was an era in which the Department of Social Security office, now the Benefits Agency—*[Interruption.]* That was a period in which those who were statutorily homeless were being kept in short-term accommodation. I am saying that a great many more people were being kept in such accommodation by the six boroughs I mentioned than by Westminster.

That was an era in which the Benefits Agency office in Lisson Grove told me that an Irish family had only to arrive at Euston and call the Ealing housing department to be accepted as homeless and then deposited in Westminster. Such use of Westminster's facilities, while of course legal, may have affected events in Westminster, including the pattern of voting.

I conclude my speech by considering the observations about Westminster's finances made by the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras, although I suspect that even he would not argue that designated sales had been responsible for the Conservative victory in Westminster in 1990—with an increase in the majority from four to 30 on a day when Conservatives were otherwise being defeated.

The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras has to fall back on Westminster's community charge—indeed, he has done so—but he has done so by reference back to Government assistance. I noted that, in his quotations of GJW lobbying, he did not allude to their lobbying of me as a Treasury Minister. What I recall more vividly is that, prior to my voting against the Government on St. Bartholomew's hospital, the only time that I have not voted for my party was when the Labour Government gave Westminster its rate support grant settlement in 1978.

As for services, Westminster continues to vote Conservative not only because of the level of the council tax but because of the quality of services. I cannot recall whether it was the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras or the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson) who claimed that Camden's efficiency was characterised by its low cleaning charge as compared with Westminster's higher one. But one has only to visit the boundary between Camden and Westminster the day after a snowfall, when Westminster's streets are clean before the start of the working day and Camden's are still snow ridden at the close of the working day, to see where the differences lie.

Attention to one's public does pay dividends. Westminster has been voted the cleanest borough in London despite a scenario in which, if I shake the hand of someone on the street during a general election, I have only a one in 20 chance of shaking the hand of someone who has the right to vote for me. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has listed similar comparative performance in other fields.

Finally, on asbestos, the Opposition have given me two separate references for their quotation from the 642-page report. Tomorrow I shall compare the quotation of the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras with the text. I agree that Mr. Barratt concluded that the council failed to exercise proper standards of management of the asbestos, but he also provided a coda to his report—in a letter to the Westminster chief executive, on 3 May—in which he confirmed that he had found no evidence of any intent whatsoever by any person deliberately to endanger the health of the flats' occupants.

6.4 pm

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): The Conservatives on Westminster city council have cheated. They have cheated their electorate, they have cheated the people of Britain and, above all, they have cheated the homeless. To pick on someone weaker than oneself is the mark of a bully, but to pick on the homeless is despicable.

There have been many efforts in this debate to claim that no one has yet been found guilty. But the six people concerned have now, we have been told, gone to appeal. One cannot appeal against a finding of guilt until there has

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been a finding of guilt. Moreover, the six have been sentenced—the surcharge certificate has been sent to them. One cannot be sentenced until one has been found guilty.

So let us be clear about it. The proudest symbols of British conservatism have been found guilty of gross misuse of public funds, of sacrificing the homeless and, worst of all, of seeking to subvert the democratic process.

This country's system of local government, sadly, has cracks that leave it open to abuse. Westminster's Tories have hammered wedges into those cracks. They have exploited the system to the full, and they have turned the abuse of power into an art form.

What has been the response of senior members of the Conservative party in the House? They have sought simply to sling so much mud around that the general public have been left with the impression that those who have been found guilty are no worse than everyone else.

Let us be clear about what the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State could and should have done. They could have denounced what has happened in Westminster, declared that such outrageous misconduct was entirely unacceptable and thrown those who have been found guilty out of their party. By their failure to do so, they have brought their whole party into disrepute.

Mr. Couchman: Does the hon. Gentleman think that it is right that people should be condemned and subjected to an unlimited fine without due process of law?

Mr. Rendel: The point, which appears to be missed by the Conservative party, is that there has been due process of law. That has continued for the past seven years, and a finding of guilt has now been made.

The Conservatives' attempt to make out that what has happened in Westminster was no worse than what is happening elsewhere—throughout local government—is dangerous and sickening. What the guilty councillors and council officers did in Westminster has, in effect, been condoned by the Conservative party, by the Secretary of State and by the Prime Minister. So much for it being the party of law and order.

By failing to recognise the judicial standing of the auditor's inquiry, the Government have sought as never before to mislead the public about the significance of the auditor's findings. They have not done so in the interests of justice but purely for their electoral benefit. They have wriggled and they have squirmed, but the fact is that six people have been found guilty of wilful misconduct.

Mr. Pickles: The hon. Gentleman talks about wriggling and squirming. Suppose that the court overturns the auditor's judgment when this matter goes to court. Who will have had the better judgment: my right hon. Friends, who have waited until they have heard what the court has to say, or the hon. Gentleman, who has condemned people before they have exhausted the judicial system?

Mr. Rendel: I can only repeat the point, which apparently the hon. Gentleman has not listened to, that these people have been found guilty by due process of law set up under his Government. If he does not understand that, he had better go back and read Mr. Magill's report.

Mr. David Shaw: I hate to disagree with an old Etonian, but I should be grateful if the hon. Gentleman could point to anywhere in the district auditor's papers where the word "guilty" is used. In the paragraphs that I have been reading, I certainly cannot find the word "guilty".

Mr. Rendel: That intervention is not particularly relevant. May I direct the hon. Gentleman to page 674 of the report, where the district auditor clearly says:

"I have found as a fact that the Council was engaged in gerrymandering."

If I am not allowed as a result of that sentence to say that the council was guilty of gerrymandering, the hon. Gentleman is misusing the word "guilty".

Let us consider rather more closely what the inquiry has been all about. The process of the inquiry that the auditor pursued is that established by a Conservative Government. Under the Local Government Finance Act 1982, the auditor was appointed to make his inquiry as long ago as 1989, following objections made by a local doctor that people in need of social housing for medical reasons were not being found secure accommodation. At the same time, Westminster city council was selling just such housing, not to tenants but to the relatively well-off from outside.

Two years ago the auditor produced his preliminary findings, based on 100,000 pages of documentation and countless interviews with councillors and officers. Seldom can a more detailed and careful report have been prepared. It should be said that some Conservative councillors and council officials went out of their way to obstruct the inquiry from the very beginning. That obstruction included the shredding of vital documents after they were known to be likely to be needed for the inquiry. I assume that that would have led to a criminal prosecution if the inquiry had been into criminal rather than simply civil misconduct.

Following the provisional findings, the respondents had every opportunity to put their case and refute the allegations made against them. Now, after seven long years, the auditor has produced his final verdict. Six people have been surcharged. Of course they have the right to appeal. I understand that they are taking up that right. However, for the Government to argue that they cannot comment on any legal case where the verdict may be subject to appeal in a higher court is sheer nonsense. What if the people lose their case in the High Court and take their appeal to the Appeal Court, then perhaps to the Lords or even as far as the European Court of Human Rights?

Are the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State seriously telling the House that they will not comment on any unlawful conduct by anyone where there remains any possibility of further appeal to a higher court? By the time the Government get round to condemning any wrongdoing, we shall all be long since dead, or at least—I suppose that this is really the point—it will be after the next general election.

The auditor's findings were the result of three main lines of inquiry—the failure to fulfil statutory duties to the homeless, the misuse of public funds and the gerrymandering of elections. What the auditor has found on each of those matters demands greater public exposure. The report is some 2,000 pages long and costs £20—good value perhaps, but it will not be widely read. Let us consider the three aspects one by one.

First, the question of homelessness. Mr. Graham England, the director of housing, in a briefing note to Councillor Porter dated 18 March 1987, is quoted by the district auditor in volume 3(A), page 438 of the report as saying:

"the effect of selling all vacancies and transfers in the key wards would be to lose 490 vacancies per annum. If 490 lettings were taken out of the equation then there would be 576 left to allocate. It can be seen from the table of demand that there would not be enough vacancies to house those people for whom we have a statutory obligation under the Homeless Persons Act. It would also not be possible to deal with high priority medical cases and community building schemes which could be considered to be politically sensitive. As the Council has an obligation to provide shelter for the homeless it would not be possible to reduce the number coming in without a change of legislation and therefore more and more people would be kept in temporary accommodation awaiting a smaller and smaller number of empty properties."

That is pretty clear advice as to where the Conservatives' obligations lay.

As the auditor himself put it on page 439, Councillor Porter

"knew that there was no professional justification for what was proposed and understood that those proposals were considered by the Director of Housing to be inconsistent with the Council's statutory obligations to the homeless."

Yet the Conservatives stepped up their outrageous plan for dealing with the problem of homeless people upsetting their electoral apple cart.

In June 1987, in the Tory seminar document called "Setting the Scene", by Councillor Porter herself, she said:

"The electoral register for the 1990 elections will be compiled in just over two years time. Some very ambitious policies must be implemented by then: providing a great deal of affordable housing in key areas; protecting the electoral base in other areas (for example, by controlling the impact of homelessness)".

What more evidence does the Conservative party want? We now all know that the Conservative vision for controlling homelessness included, sadly, placing homeless families into blocks of flats riddled with exposed asbestos—flats that the council knew were unfit to live in. That particular practice moved Mr. John Barratt, in a separate inquiry commissioned by Westminster city council, to write:

"Despite the availability of the clearest advice to the contrary, those acting on behalf of a public body took risks, for a variety of reasons, with the health of the people who ought to have been entitled to assume that such risks were not being taken."

So it is important to stress the seriousness of Westminster city council's lack of care.

Conservative policy in Westminster was not just social engineering. It was evidence of the Tories' obscene and callous disregard for the needs and rights of homeless people, simply on the basis that they did not vote Conservative. As that is the way in which Conservatives treat those people who do not vote for them, perhaps the scandal at Westminster helps to explain the Tories' national philosophy of sponsoring the haves in our society and leaving the weak, the vulnerable, the old, the sick and the homeless to fend for themselves.

Secondly, the auditor has gone into great detail about the misuse of public funds by Conservative councillors. His report shows the full scale of the scandalous designated sales policy. The auditor's figures include the misuse of capital grants, £2.5 million; the cost of keeping dwellings empty, £1.6 million; losses arising from the disposal of dwellings, £38.5 million—including £4.2 million for the additional cost of housing the homeless in substitute accommodation such as bed-and-breakfast hostels—staff and professional costs, £2.1 million; and interest on those losses, £5.2 million. That brings the total of public money misused purely for the benefit of the Conservative party to a staggering £49.8 million. It is only because of the assumed interest of £15.2 million plus some other minor savings and service charges that the surcharge figure is brought down to £31.7 million. That hardly represents financial prudence, leaving aside the political motives involved.

Let us examine the capital grants. Payments of £15,000 were made to council house tenants to move out of their social housing so that their homes could be sold not to someone in need but to someone more likely to vote Conservative. The waste of public funds by Westminster city council has been shown to be of a different order of magnitude from that in any comparable local government scandal which has come to light. The council which the Conservatives called their flagship has turned out to be the single most wasteful council in the whole country.

Thirdly, and most importantly, there is the question of gerrymandering. Conservative councillors did not only waste millions of pounds of public money and fail to fulfil their moral and legal duty to the homeless. The real disgrace is that it was all done purely for the electoral interests of the Conservative party. To any democrat, gerrymandering is a most serious offence. It is subversion of the very democracy upon which our society is based. The auditor could not be more clear. Conservative councillors have been found guilty of gerrymandering.

Such gerrymandering would be pointless, if not impossible, if we used a proportional system of voting rather than first-past-the-post. The present system lends itself to attempts to gerrymander marginal wards, which would not exist in the same way under a proportional system. A change to proportional representation would immediately insulate the democratic process from people who seek to abuse their political power.

Mr. Pickles: What about the single transferable vote system and the multiple transferable vote system in operation in Italy, which both readily lend themselves to gerrymandering?

Mr. David Shaw: And corruption.

Mr. Pickles: And corruption.

Mr. Rendel: I am not sure what arguments the hon. Gentleman has to back up his assertion. He has given none. There is plenty of corruption in Italy, but it does not involve gerrymandering the electoral system.

Of Lady Porter, on page 417 of the report the auditor concludes:

"I find as a fact that she was concerned to secure an increase in the number of home owners and a reduction in the number of homeless households accommodated in marginal (or key) wards by 1990, in order to increase the number of likely Conservative voters in those wards in the 1990 local government elections. For her, the designated sales policy was a means to that end."

Mr. Shaw: Can the hon. Gentleman say how it is possible in designated council house sales—a policy that I have supported—to determine whether the people moving in, or the existing residents if the house is sold to them, are Conservative or Labour voters? How is it possible to know that Labour voters have turned into Conservative voters as a result of the contract of sale?

Mr. Rendel: Once again the hon. Gentleman misses the point. The policy was not meant to turn Labour voters

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into Conservative voters but to ensure that people who were more likely, in the nature of things, to be Conservative voters lived in certain wards and that those who were more likely to be Labour voters lived in other wards where their votes did not matter. It is not a question of turning people's votes or knowing about each individual voter or house owner.

On page 418 the auditor states:

"On 5th June 1986, in response to a request from Councillor Lady Porter, Councillor Kirwan produced a note 'covering the possibilities of balancing the social mix in Westminster', having regard to 'a number of factors contributing to the drop in "our" natural support.' These included the cost of housing and the growth of hotels and hostels catering among others for 'homeless/down and outs, who are not our natural supporters.'"

On page 419, the report states:

"On 24th June 1986, Cllr Lady Porter, accompanied by Cllrs Weeks and Legg, attended a meeting of the Chief Officers' Board, at which they informed the Chief Officers that the majority [Conservative] party intended to win the next election, that this would be the focus of their attention and that majority [Conservative] party objectives included, 'Social engineering including Housing'."

On page 422, the auditor states:

"Councillor Kirwan also presented a paper to the Conservative Party seminar held on 6 September 1986. Her paper entitled, 'Westminster's Housing 1986-1990' specified the objective as: 'to ensure that as far as possible, Westminster's housing policies achieve the type of social and economic residential mix that will enable us to retain control of the Council in 1990 and help to retain the Conservative majority in the Parliamentary seat of North Westminster'."

The evidence is damning and public and in the auditor's report for all to see and form a judgment on. The fact that six people were found guilty of wilful misconduct in their misuse of taxpayer's money does not exonerate others who received stinging criticism for their failure to put a stop to malpractice. In that, we must include, sadly, the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Mr. Legg). The auditor has made it clear that the hon. Gentleman knew that gerrymandering was going on and did nothing about it and that he should have taken action to stop it. He is excused from any surcharge on the ground that he did not realise that he had a duty to stop the gerrymandering.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The hon. Gentleman has continued this ridiculous line about my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Mr. Legg), who was exonerated in the report. If he cared to look, he would find that it was clear, and accepted by the auditor, that my hon. Friend accepted the legal opinion given by the Westminster solicitors that what was taking place—and this may still be proven to be so—was legal. On that basis, we have only an opinion of the auditor in hindsight but it does not change his overall finding. It is time that the hon. Gentleman withdrew that line.

Mr. Rendel: The relevant section of report states:

"The legal advice, of which Councillor Legg was aware, gave no support for targeting designation in the key marginal words to promote the electoral advantage of the Conservative party."

The case is clear.

The question that we and the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West have to answer is whether a man whose moral judgment allows him to take no action to put an end to malpractice is a fit person to be a Member of the House? The only honourable course for a Member so heavily criticised for his poor behaviour in public office is to resign. The hon. Gentleman has condoned gerrymandering and so undermined the basis of our democracy. He should go.

Mr. David Shaw: The hon. Gentleman is a councillor.

Mr. Rendel: No I am not.

Mr. Shaw: The hon. Gentleman was a councillor. Will he confirm that his Liberal group on the council never took a political decision?

Mr. Rendel: I am staggered by that question and do not quite know how to answer it. All political groups are in the business of taking political decisions. It is an amazing question. I shall continue and perhaps not take any more interventions.

Mr. Gunnell: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Rendel: I hope that this intervention will be more sensible than the previous one.

Mr. Gunnell: It was not the taking of a political decision that was wrong but the decision to use council money for the illegal purpose of gerrymandering. That is the auditor's charge. Of course the Westminster Tories are entitled to take political decisions but the auditor must decide whether they were reasonable.

Mr. Rendel: That is correct and I thank the hon. Gentleman. Every decision taken by any council or by the House must be classified as political. If we did not take political decisions, we would have no purpose whatever. Some members of the public may think that, but hon. Members like to think that we have some purpose.

To continue on a more sensible note, if Conservative Ministers showed signs of remorse for what their colleagues did in Westminster, it would be easy to be more charitable and to regard the matter as a problem caused by a small clique going awry.

The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for the Environment have thrown back their opportunities for repentance and have shrugged off the findings of the seven-year inquiry. To them, a guilty verdict means nothing. Such is their arrogance in power that they feel impervious to the judicial system. That senior Conservatives committed the offences that they did for party political gain is a scandal—but the indifference of the Prime Minister and of the Secretary of State to that misconduct and to the process of law is truly shameful. By their failure to take action to remove the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South–West from the Conservative party and from the House, they too are condoning gerrymandering. They have brought dishonour to the House and to their party, and they too should go.

6.29 pm

Mr. James Couchman (Gillingham): Last Thursday, and again this afternoon, the House was treated to a shameless and cynical display of what I can only refer to

as humbuggery rarely equalled even by its author, the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), on those two occasions. I am disappointed not to see the hon. Gentleman in his place, for there is the true inheritor of the mantle of Herbert Morrison. The hon. Gentleman accused the erstwhile members of Westminster city council of heinous municipal misdeeds. The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Mr. Wareing) went even further and described them as crimes. He will be disappointed to learn that gerrymandering—unattractive though it may be, and it occurs in the hon. Gentleman's party as in others—is not a crime or a criminal offence.

The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras accused leading members of Westminster city council of being in cahoots with the city's officials and with the whole Tory party, from top to bottom—including Conservative central office and No. 10 Downing street. The hon. Gentleman's promise last Thursday that an incoming Labour Government would establish a public inquiry rings hollow when one recalls the rich heritage of local government waste, incompetence, chicanery and gerrymandering presided over by Labour-controlled councils since the early years of this century.

The hon. Member made much of Herbert Morrison's motives for building council houses in London, but he said precious little about Herbert Morrison's famous phrase:

"I will build"—

Ms Armstrong: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Couchman: No, not at this time. Herbert Morrison said:

"I will build the Conservatives out of London."

Ms Armstrong: When did he say that?

Mr. Couchman: He was leader of the Labour London county council between 1934 and 1940. Between 1934 and 1939, 84,000 council houses were built in London, and the Conservative party did not control London for another 30 years. Herbert Morrison was remarkably successful. The man who became Lord Morrison of Lambeth set out deliberately to ruin areas that he judged to be middle class, suburban and hostile to the Labour party. Did I say Lambeth? There is a resonance. It is the acme of appalling loony left councils.

Ms Armstrong: Will the hon. Gentleman give way now?

Mr. Couchman: No, I want to make some progress. The hon. Lady has already made several speeches this afternoon, and doubtless we shall have to listen to her again at half-past nine.

Who was Herbert Morrison? He must have been old Labour—but in a straight dynastic line, old Labour gave way to new Labour. Herbert Morrison passed down his Tammany skills to his grandson, the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson)—that Rasputin of new Labour.

The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras, playing the part of Captain Humbug to perfection, failed to remind the House of his time as leader of Camden council. He failed to tell us about the report in *The Observer* in 1975, which calculated that Camden had the highest spending on housing per head of population of any area in the country, by far the highest Government housing subsidies per head of any other area, the highest management costs in the country, by far the largest housing revenue account deficit per head of any other area, the highest rent arrears in the country, the largest programme of buying up already tenanted and adequately run blocks of flats, and by far the most council housing schemes. I wonder why the hon. Gentleman failed to tell us all that? He is probably embarrassed by comparisons between Camden and other councils, which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State described at length.

Mr. Betts: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Gentleman has spent a long time talking about Camden, Herbert Morrison and other issues that I cannot find in either the motion or the amendment. Will you give consideration to whether the hon. Gentleman is in order?

Mr. David Shaw: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. When Madam Speaker was in the Chair, and Mr. Deputy Speaker before you, the Opposition cited Liverpool and a number of other councils, including Monklands. You ought to be aware, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the debate has gone extremely wide.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Janet Fookes): As I understand it, the hon. Member for Gillingham (Mr. Couchman) was making comparisons, which is in order. It would not be in order if no reference was made to the subject under discussion. I am not aware from my short time in the Chair that that has been the case.

Mr. Couchman: Are you saying, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I have not mentioned Westminster city council?

Madam Deputy Speaker: On the contrary: from the short time that I have been in the Chair this evening, I am not aware that the hon. Gentleman—by the token that I have just given—has been out of order. In other words, the hon. Gentleman is in order.

Mr. Couchman: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Camden is at the heart of folklore about bad local government. It not only rivals Islington, Hackney, Haringey and Lambeth—it is probably ahead of them in its grants to way-out groups in the name of political correctness and in neglecting its social service responsibilities. As a former chairman of social services, I deprecate that appalling lack of responsibility.

Ms Glenda Jackson: If the hon. Gentleman is not out of order, he is way out of time. I presume that he is referring to Camden in 1975. We are now in 1996, debating corruption in Westminster city council. Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the Department of the Environment persistently praises Camden for its management of housing stock and for the way in which it deals with its lets? Camden has also received a citizens charter mark for the speed and efficiency with which it runs its housing benefit office.

Mr. Couchman: I was referring to Camden not in 1975, but in 1994 when a report about children in the care

[Mr. Couchman]

of Camden's social services department was made public. That report revealed that there were no coherent policies in place and that Camden's expenditure was among the highest in London. The money was spent to such poor effect that in some cases the council's records did not show where the children had been placed. The district auditor himself had to track down one child. Adoptions were not progressed—some had stalled three years. Many children had not been sent to school, and children were not prepared for adult life. One child approaching 18 had not been seen since 1988. Camden also appears to have been profligate in purchasing a computer system for £1.5 million, which it obviously did not use during those years.

Mr. David Shaw: If there has been so much child abuse in Camden and Islington, why has no district auditor found the basis for surcharging the Labour councillors responsible?

Ms Glenda Jackson: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member for Gillingham (Mr. Couchman) made no reference to child abuse in Camden or Islington. Is it in order for the hon. Member for Dover (Mr. Shaw) yet again to show that his turpitude is matched only by his ineptitude in so grossly maligning local authorities in relation to a matter that is not on the Order Paper and which has not been raised by the hon. Member for Gillingham?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I am not responsible for the content or accuracy of the speeches made by hon. Members. I have already explained that I will allow a certain latitude in drawing comparisons between councils. However, I expect hon. Members to return to the substance of the debate.

Mr. Couchman: I do not want to go into the detail of the extraordinarily high tax bills laboured on the ratepayers of Camden, as we are here to discuss Camden council's neighbour, Westminster council—which runs its affairs much better, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment has made clear. What a sorry tale the comparisons of those two neighbouring councils have been.

I hold no brief for those people in Westminster council who may have abused or misused their elected positions if the courts find them culpable. However, the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) was at pains to condemn them as though the due process of law had been exhausted, but the due process of law has not begun. The district auditor is not a lawyer and the courts will decide whether his findings are correct.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: Has the hon. Gentleman been listening?

Mr. Couchman: Yes, I listened very carefully to the speech of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. It is entirely proper that the people who have been named by the district auditor have the right to take their case to the courts, to be heard and to have their case examined by the due process of law.

Ms Hodge: Of course those people have the right to appeal, but this is a report in the public interest. Does the hon. Gentleman agree, therefore, that the members of Westminster council, under their statutory obligations, will have to discuss this report in the public interest? They do not have the privilege that hon. Members have in the House. If it is a duty for them to discuss the report, how can it not be a duty for hon. Members also to discuss it?

Mr. Couchman: I presume that the former leader of Islington council—the hon. Lady obviously spoke from experience—wishes to deny the due process of law to the six people involved. The appeal to the High Court of Justice, followed by a possible appeal to the Court of Appeal and beyond represents the continuation of the due process of law. The district auditor is no substitute for a magistrates court or a Crown court; he is an accountant. In the case of the Westminster inquiry, I am certain that he is a distinguished accountant, as he is a senior partner of Deloitte Touche. I believe that he is a part-time district auditor because he retains his responsibilities with that firm of accountants.

As I said to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State last Thursday, I am concerned by the process that has brought these people—whom some would call the Westminster Six—to their predicament. I am extremely concerned that the accountant district auditor has acted in the roles of investigator, prosecutor, judge, jury and hangman.

Mr. Rendel: The hon. Gentleman is saying that the auditor is merely an accountant and not a lawyer. He is casting a great slur on magistrates who are not lawyers.

Mr. Couchman: I am not casting slurs on magistrates. My wife is a magistrate and I respect her integrity. Magistrates rely on the advice of lawyers and their decisions can be appealed. I am concerned that we have asked the same person to have the multiple roles that I have just described. That is against the principle of natural justice. I am worried that the Government prescribed those roles to the same person in the Local Government Finance Act 19[illegible].

The hon. Member for West Derby asked me where I was on 14 February 1986 when his hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Mr. Loyden) introduced his Disqualification and Surcharge of Councillors (Abolition) Bill as a private Member's Bill. He will be amazed to hear that I can actually tell him: I was in my constituency speaking to some 200 people about the Government's proposals for Sunday trading. Had I been here, I would have expressed my concerns.

Although my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State cannot introduce any measures to revisit the 1982 Act while the Westminster case is proceeding, it seems to me that this is a most unsatisfactory process—the fact that the investigator, the prosecutor and the adjudicator is the same person and has the power to impose an unlimited fine, for that is exactly what the surcharge is. The auditor has suggested an enormous sum in this case.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: Public money has been lost.

Mr. Couchman: We shall see whether that claim is upheld by the courts. I am not convinced by the process used by the auditor to compute the sum. I accept the figures that the hon. Member for Newbury read out—I have read the same figures—but I am not convinced that that computation will stand up to proper scrutiny.

Mr. Heppell: The hon. Gentleman has queried Mr. Magill's role in a number of areas and is now querying his role as an accountant. As an accountant, Mr. Magill has counted the cost—surely that is one thing that we can rely on.

Mr. Couchman: I believe that Mr. Magill has also relied on other judgments. As an accountant, he has computed all sorts of curious figures which I do not have in front of me.

Mr. David Shaw: My hon. Friend may be aware that three firms of chartered accountants disagreed with Mr. Magill, and they said so at the inquiry. There is some doubt about the accountancy methods used.

Mr. Couchman: I defer to my accountant hon. Friend, who will understand the doubts that I have about Mr. Magill's computation in this case. My concern about this process is that it may have an impact on the future recruitment of able and qualified council candidates. As a former London councillor, I know that if I had read the report and if I had seen what has happened in this case I would have been extremely concerned. The people concerned relied on advice that they were given by the city's lawyers.

Mr. Betts *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Couchman: We are assured by those who are most intimately concerned with this case that they relied on the city's lawyers.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Couchman: No, I have given way enough and I wish to draw my remarks to a close. If this sort of thing happens time and again we should be worried for the future of local government. My local authority is to become part of a unitary authority and I wish to see next year's elections take place between candidates who are of a good quality across all the parties. This case will have a considerable effect on the willingness of people to stand as elected members of councils.

6.48 pm

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): This has been an astonishing debate and, in fact, we have heard astounding comments since the district auditor's report was published. There has not been a single word of apology for anything that went on in Westminster; there has been denigration of the auditor and his report; and there has been denigration of other councils on completely irrelevant matters—they have nothing to do with anything that has gone on in Westminster or that is covered in the auditor's report on Westminster. The Secretary of State, who refuses to comment, made a nauseatingly sanctimonious speech about why he could not comment and spent the rest of his speech rubbishing other councils on matters irrelevant to the motion on the Order Paper.

Mr. Brooke: In my speech, I referred to the observations of the Leader of the Opposition, and in following up those remarks by the Leader of the Opposition I compared the behaviour of Labour councils in putting homeless people into short-term accommodation with that of Westminster. If the hon. Gentleman considers that that is irrelevant, he is doing a disservice to the leader of his party.

Mr. Gerrard: I believe that the right hon. Gentleman is the only Member on the Opposition Benches who has made a real attempt tonight to address the contents of the report. I shall come later to the points that he made about placing homeless families. I accept that he tried to address the issues, and he was unique, in speaking from the Opposition Benches, in doing that tonight.

Mr. Brooke: The opposite Benches.

Mr. Gerrard: From the opposite Benches. It will be the Opposition Benches soon.

Ministers and most of the other Tory Members who have spoken have made no attempt to justify or apologise for what was done and to account for it politically or morally, even if they wish to pretend that what Westminster did was legally correct or argue that it may be proven legally correct. No one has denied what happened—what happened to homeless families, to flats that were kept empty, and to the taxpayers of Westminster, who have ended up losing large amounts of public money as a result of the policies that were followed in Westminster. The victims of those policies were, first, Westminster taxpayers and secondly, and most important, homeless people.

Some of the quotations from the district auditor's report demonstrate the callous disregard that was shown towards the rights of people who were homeless in Westminster. We are told that there were notes from the director of housing, of meetings during which there were discussions about finding

"suitable wards for housing homeless long term"

and

"how can we get the homeless out of Westminster City Council".

There was a discussion on 23 September 1986, at the chairmen's group, of a "key policy" of

"permanent rehousing of homeless outside Westminster City Council".

It was said that

"Officers should adopt a tougher policy".

As my hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) said, that decision was reported to the chief officers' board on 25 September 1986 as, "be mean and nasty".

Undoubtedly, as the district auditor said in his report, it is obvious from the housing strategy that was proposed after May 1986—concentrating activity in marginal wards and increasing designated sales—that the objective of the leadership of the majority party was to rehouse homeless people outside the marginal wards, which the Conservative party was especially concerned about.

As has been mentioned several times, homeless families were put into flats containing asbestos, but that was done for more than one reason. The Barratt report says that there was advice. The hon. Member for Newbury

[Mr. Gerrard]

(Mr. Rendel) quoted a sentence from that report. A further paragraph refers to the decision in 1989 to accommodate homeless families, and states that that

"in particular, appears from contemporary in house documents to have been seriously flawed in terms of lack of proper process . . . improper objectives, and . . . known asbestos risks being overridden."

Mr. Barratt made it clear that there were additional reasons.

One of the things that was going on at that time was that on the Waterton and Elgin estates, which is where the flats were, Waterton and Elgin Community Homes, the tenants' organisation, was trying to take control of that estate, using legislation that had been introduced by the Conservative Government with the intention that it be used in Labour councils. The Government were taken aback to find that one of the first places where it began to be used was in Westminster, on the Waterton and Elgin estates.

Placing homeless families in the blocks on the Elgin estate was part of the strategy to fight off the attempt to take control by the tenants' association. Flats were deliberately left empty that could have been used.

It is true, as the right hon. Member for Westminster, North said—

Mr. Brooke: South.

Mr. Gerrard: As the right hon. Member for City of London and Westminster, South (Mr. Brooke) said, there was a period when homeless people from many London boroughs were in bed and breakfast in Westminster. At one time, many local authorities used bed and breakfast and families were scattered across London.

Gradually, over several years, negotiations took place between the London boroughs. Agreements were made to rationalise, so that homeless families would not be placed in bed and breakfast. Boroughs also wanted to reduce costs to a reasonable level, because it was very costly for the boroughs for all the homeless families to end up in bed and breakfast.

Towards the end of the 1980s, and especially in the early 1990s, most boroughs were gaining control of that position, but Westminster maintained a clear policy of shipping people out of the borough. The only borough that approached Westminster's record of shipping out homeless families at that time was Tower Hamlets, which was then under Liberal Democrat control and caused considerable problems for other councils in east London by shipping out homeless families.

When those homeless families were dumped throughout London, the councils in the areas where they were dumped ended up paying much of the bill—the education and social services costs. Those families were often then made homeless in the borough to which they had been moved, which often ended up paying to rehouse them.

Boroughs such as my own, Waltham Forest—one of two London boroughs that actively completely avoided using bed and breakfast during the 1980s—ended up paying the cost of Westminster dumping its homeless families on us, at the same time as Westminster city council was keeping flats empty in Westminster to sell to try to retain political control of Westminster.

The district auditor will not consider the cost to other boroughs. The £31 million does not include the extra costs of having to tackle that problem, which were passed on to other boroughs.

Another part of the strategy that has not been mentioned much in the debate was the creation of what was called the Westminster Housing Trust. That was all part of the strategy of building stable communities. It was an attempt at social engineering—an attempt to manage the planning system with the intention that certain developers would acquire sites in the key wards and build expensive properties on them, in the expectation that the bulk of the people who moved in would be more likely to vote Tory than Labour.

It quickly became obvious that that strategy alone would not be terribly successful. A report referred to what was intended. In a paper produced by a council officer in August 1987, when the council had been considering the target schedules for new electors in the wards, we read:

"The overwhelming message from these figures is that the Council will have to rely very heavily on the housing trust/private sector and planning gain routes to achieve the electoral objectives in the key wards."

Interestingly, on the copy of that paper obtained by the district auditor, the City solicitor has handwritten:

"This paper should not have been written by an officer. Much more subtle approach required. This paper shows officers working for a Tory victory."

That is the last thing that any council officer should be required to do.

Trade-offs were part of the deal. One of the key people in the Westminster Housing Trust was Mr. Richard Loftus, the original proposer of the trust. Over the next three or four years, the company of which Mr. Loftus is a director was able to secure some significant planning permissions in Baker street. Those permissions overturned deals that had been done previously to keep properties in a conservation area. The permissions overturned also a decision by the then responsible Secretary of State in 1981. A great deal of money has been made in the Baker street area as a result.

No doubt has been cast during the debate, or previously, on any of the documentary evidence that has been uncovered by the auditor. None of it has been challenged. No suggestion has been made that it is false. The documentary evidence stands. If individuals adopt certain actions, they must face the consequences. Conservative Members do not do much good by complaining about the 1982 legislation, including the power that it gives to auditors. Conservative Members did not complain when Labour councillors were being surcharged.

Surcharging is a mechanism that should be discontinued. It applies only to councillors. How many bankrupt Ministers would we have had over the past few years if they had been surcharged for illegal decisions? The Home Secretary would probably have been bankrupted six times over by now. What about the Ministers who made the illegal decision on the Pergau dam? If a councillor makes such a decision, however, he is personally surcharged. I do not hold any brief for the surcharging system. It is too late, however, for those who introduced it to complain about it.

I accept that councillors who break the law should face the legal consequences of so doing. They should be taken before the courts and disqualified. I am not suggesting

that councillors should be free from the strictures of the law. As I said, I do not believe that surcharging is necessarily the best way in which to proceed.

Local government power was being used in Westminster for purely party political ends. We are all, of course, elected on political programmes. We all make promises about programmes that we want to put in place. We all do that in the hope that we shall win votes, win the next election and retain power to continue putting programmes into practice. We all understand that process. But that is not what happened in Westminster.

There was not an open process in Westminster, with individuals putting forward legal programmes and trying to win support and electoral success on the basis of everyone being aware of what was being discussed.

Mr. David Shaw: The point that the auditor makes in his report is that Westminster councillors made not a legal decision, as he alleges, but a political decision. The hon. Gentleman and the hon. Members for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) and for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) have all told us that they have been members of council groups that have made political decisions.

Mr. Gerrard: We are politicians and we make political decisions. But political decisions that are made by local authorities must be made within a laid-down legal framework. That framework makes it clear that political decisions must not be made behind closed doors for party political purposes. Public funds should not be used for purposes that the law does not allow. The district auditor is saying that public money was misused.

Ms Hodge: Does my hon. Friend agree that Conservative Members are deliberately getting things wrong? The primary purpose of the Westminster decision was political. *[Interruption.]* The purpose of other decisions that were taken in a political context was electoral advantage. *[Interruption.]* The by-product of such decisions is electoral gain, but it is not the primary purpose.

Mr. Gerrard: I agree that—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. There is an increasing tendency for seated interjections, which are not confined to one side of the House. From whichever side they come, I deplore them.

Mr. Gerrard: There is a deliberate attempt to misunderstand. There are many Members who have been in local government. They understand the constraints within which local government works. They understand also the difference between making a decision that it is hoped will be electorally popular and making a decision improperly. There are clear distinctions between the two approaches.

Ms Armstrong: Is not the real issue that the Westminster city council solicitor told the then leader of the council that

"the advantages of sale have to be considered not from any ulterior motive but from the standpoint of what is right in view of the Council's role as a housing authority."?

That was the council's primary duty as a housing authority. Therefore, the needs of the homeless had to come first, whatever the political considerations.

Mr. Gerrard: Absolutely. That is an exact example of the legal constraints within which councils must work. Westminster was operating in a completely different league from other councils. Events in Westminster were the culmination of the Tory attitude to local government over some years. Since the Government took office in 1979, local government powers have been reduced. Local government spending has been cut. There has been increasing pressure on local authorities. Any local authority that was not Tory-controlled was regarded as an enemy, as an authority to be crushed. It was felt that it should have as little power and influence as possible.

As we have seen fewer and fewer Tory councils—Westminster is the flagship council among them—the attitude of hanging on at all costs has prevailed. The Tories think, "It does not matter what we do because it is vital that we stay in control. Never mind whether what is being done is immoral or illegal. Those considerations must be subjugated in our determination to retain political control." That is what was going on. If Ministers are not prepared to condemn what took place in Westminster, ultimately they will be condemning themselves.

7.7 pm

Mr. David Shaw (Dover): Before commenting on Westminster city council, I shall take up some of the remarks of the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), who referred to my involvement in Monklands. Before my involvement in that area, wrongdoing was suppressed and covered up. Subsequent to my involvement, the people were told a great deal about what went on.

People were told about an ombudsman's report that found against the council. There was a council housing fiddle, and a councillor's friend had precedence over a disabled elderly couple. They were told also about two industrial tribunals before which hearings had gone against the council because councillors had conducted secret meetings. We have been told that Labour councillors do not meet in secret, but that is what happened at Monklands.

The people of Monklands were told about a taxi licensing fraud. They were informed of two police investigations.

Ms Armstrong: Is this in order?

Mr. Shaw: The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras referred to my work in Monklands. I am replying to his comments. The hon. Gentleman was held to be in order.

Ms Armstrong: Is the hon. Gentleman denying the words of the judge who was called in by the Secretary of State for Scotland, who said of the hon. Gentleman:

"As his evidence went on, I became increasingly unimpressed by it. I regarded his attitude as irresponsible."

How does the hon. Gentleman expect us to take him seriously?

Mr. Shaw: I thank the hon. Lady for repeating what the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras said earlier.

[Mr. Shaw]

I shall return to that, but the hon. Lady has interrupted me in the middle of pointing out my success in terms of uncovering what went on in Monklands. The reference she quoted was from a report solely on employees. It did not refer to the ombudsman's report on housing, industrial tribunals, taxi licensing fraud or the two police investigations in Monklands.

In addition, I personally uncovered losses of £6 million over three years in five council-owned companies in Monklands. With interest, those losses will rise to about £30 million over the next 10 years.

Ms Glenda Jackson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Shaw: Not for the moment; I shall make some progress.

When costs are included, those losses of £30 million in Monklands will probably exceed any surcharge in Westminster. We need to put the Westminster surcharge into perspective. No councillors in Monklands have yet been surcharged, despite all the political decisions that were taken by Labour party groups behind closed doors.

Labour party rules in Monklands stipulate that, if a decision is taken by a Labour group behind closed doors, every Labour councillor must abide by that decision or be thrown out of the local Labour party. Such a rule is common among Labour parties up and down the country. The Labour whip is enforced rigidly on political decisions.

We need no lessons in Westminster supporting the argument that a political decision was taken. Labour councillors make political decisions every day of the week, and they enforce them rigidly. In many cases, those decisions result in financial losses. For some reason, however, the district auditor in Westminster has taken a different view of a particular political decision from the views of district auditors elsewhere in the country, who do not surcharge Labour councillors who lose vast amounts of money.

In Lambeth and other councils, the Labour party has lost vast sums of money—far more than Westminster—yet, for some reason, the district auditors seem to leave those Labour councillors alone. However, the public know the truth.

The Labour party in Monklands has backed me, as it has barred every Labour councillor in Monklands from holding office in the new council. The Labour party backed me in Monklands, because it finally had to admit that I had been right all along.

I now turn to the QC's report. A QC decided that, although the council employed 45 family members of councillors, he could not find anything wrong. He did not determine in his report that there was nothing wrong or that my evidence was wrong. He said that he simply could not find anything wrong.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Surely the hon. Gentleman's speech cannot be in order. He has not made a passing reference to Monklands; his whole speech is about Monklands.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I understand that allusions were made to the hon. Gentleman's role in Monklands. In those circumstances, he has some right to make his own case, but not at enormous length. However, he should now return to the main subject of the debate.

Mr. Shaw: My comments on Monklands would have been shorter but for the intervention by the hon. Member for North–West Durham (Ms Armstrong) and the point of order that has just been raised.

In conclusion, in his report, which cost the taxpayer £50,000, the QC said that he was unable to go along with my suggestion of proving his findings by reference to other councils' practices. It is a strange lawyer who does not look at precedents.

I should like to turn to Westminster council, but before doing so, I make a declaration. I understand from the rules of the House that I am under no obligation to make the following declaration, but it could be relevant to the debate. I have always wanted to make very full disclosure. I should like to make it clear to the House that I have known John Porter for some 14 years, and I have had business connections with him since before I entered the House of Commons. I have had very little contact with his family.

The House should also know that, much to my surprise, I have known a former Labour councillor on Westminster council. I knew him at a social event that I attended in the past few years. I have also known one or two Conservative councillors on Westminster council. In my experience, none of the people involved in the case are serial killers or should be compared with them, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Mr. Wareing) said earlier in the debate. None of the people I have just mentioned has asked me to make a speech; nor have they been involved in its preparation.

I lived in Westminster for four years. I voted in the 1990 council elections, and I voted for a policy of selling council houses. Westminster had a low proportion of home ownership, and the council owned far too many houses. During the four years that I lived in Westminster, it was a clean, well-run council, and there was a high turnout in council elections.

We retained control of Westminster council not because of gerrymandering, but because people did not want Labour in power. There was one of the highest turnouts in council elections that many people had seen for many years. For various reasons, I now live in Lambeth, and I am saddened by the fact that in Lambeth even the road signs are gerrymandered. Lambeth has red road signs. The Labour party is trying to put its party colours all over Lambeth, along with the council flats and the unemployment that it has gerrymandered into Lambeth.

If the surcharge imposed on Westminster councillors is confirmed by the High Court, it will be in complete contrast to all previous cases. Legal advice has been taken from eminent QCs at every stage. Officers were most careful, as were members of the council. After the initial decision to sell council houses—which I understand was a political policy decision similar to those made in every political party group on every council—the officers were the only people involved in the detailed implementation of the policy. They quite properly prevented councillors from interfering with individual sales, and restricted them to policy decisions.

I shall address the main part of my speech to the objectors. Who are the objectors to the accounts that set the district auditor going? At one time, there were

13 objectors to the accounts of Westminster city council, but now there are only four. Nine of the objectors have pulled out. The ordinary members of the public have pulled out, and there are now only four Labour activists: a Labour councillor, a former Labour councillor, an activist in the Labour party, and a lifelong Labour party member.

Those four Labour activists are financed by the trade unions and Labour party supporters through the Westminster Objectors Trust. The trust is run by Sir David Puttnam, the millionaire film director who helps the media-friendly image of certain people's actions, Baroness Jay, and the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Sparkbrook (Mr. Hattersley). It is a totally Labour-run activity.

Let me turn to the quality of the objectors. One objector who has withdrawn was the former girl friend of the main objector, Neale Coleman, but as soon as he dumped her, she ceased to object to the accounts of Westminster city council. That is how strong her objection was: as soon as she was dumped by the original objector, she was no longer interested in objecting herself. That is very relevant, because, as I shall demonstrate, the objections are based on corruption, and there is no substantive backing for them.

According to one of the objectors, £200,000 has been raised from trade unions and Labour party supporters to fight the battle. That battle is being fought on political grounds, which is one reason why two churchmen withdrew their objections: they did not want to become involved in the heavy politics of Labour party trade unionism. I understand that Unison, the Labour-supporting trade union that does not encourage Labour Front-Bench spokesmen to declare their donations, has donated £21,000 to the Labour battle—as it is seen—in Westminster.

All four of the Westminster Labour objectors are company directors as well as being Labour party activists. The primary objector, Mr. Neale Coleman, is a former Labour Westminster councillor who has a company—No. 2502022—known as Paddington Consultancy Partnership Ltd., with Mr. Stephen Hilditch, secretary and director of the Westminster Objectors Trust. Councillor Peter Bradley, another objector, owns company No. 2844795, which goes by the name of Millbank Consultants Ltd. In due course, I shall explain how those companies and their actions are involved.

Mr. Gunnell: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can explain why it is in order for him to use his privileged position in the House to attack the objectors personally, when it seems that it is not possible at this stage to comment on those who—in my view—have been found guilty by the district auditor.

Mr. Shaw: That shows that the hon. Gentleman is approaching the matter on a political basis. The motion tabled by his party refers to wrongdoing on Westminster council; what the hon. Gentleman does not like is the fact that I am about to expose wrongdoing on the part of Labour members of that council.

The three objectors to whom I have referred—former Westminster councillor Mr. Neale Coleman, Mr. Stephen Hilditch, and Councillor Peter Bradley—own companies which, in the past few years, have earned £1 million in fees from planning consultancy political work obtained through their membership of the Labour party.

Ms Armstrong: So what?

Mr. Shaw: The hon. Lady clearly could not care less about Labour corruption.

Ms Armstrong: What is corrupt about a company that is legally registered, does work and is paid for that work, given that all that is declared, open and above board?

Mr. Shaw: Perhaps the hon. Lady would like to intervene again. Would she like to tell us that none of those companies, and none of the individuals involved, has ever earned those fees from Labour councils as a result of Labour decisions made in those councils?

Ms Armstrong: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that any company that earns money from a political party, or from a council run by a particular political party, is, by virtue of obtaining the contract involved, corrupt? That is what he seems to be alleging.

Mr. Shaw: The hon. Lady is missing the point. The point is the word "favours", as I shall explain.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: If the hon. Gentleman suspects wrongdoing and corruption, what steps has he taken to refer the matter to the auditor? If he suspects criminal behaviour, what steps has he taken to refer it to the police?

Mr. Shaw: If he is patient, the hon. Gentleman will hear more. Indeed, he will hear something of great interest to him about the people who booted him out of the leadership of the council with which he was involved.

The hon. Gentleman should recognise that £1 million in fees from lobbying and political consultancy work is more than any Conservative Member has earned recently. We have been criticised by the Opposition: we have had to take some stick from them. But, when £1 million in fees for consultancies—political quid pro quos and backhanders—is floating around the Labour party, Opposition Members suddenly say that that cannot possibly be wrong if Labour is involved.

Mr. Prentice: Get in touch with the police.

Mr. Shaw: The hon. Gentleman may want to do that when I have finished my speech, but perhaps he will stop interrupting. He is clearly very worried when anyone raises any concerns about the Labour party. Earlier today, we heard from Labour how perfect it is on this issue—how perfect it is when it wants to criticise people if there is any wrongdoing. The hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) should wait and see; he can decide whether he wants to criticise people when I have finished my speech.

The objections to the accounts of Westminster council are not due to any concern for the residents of Westminster. Those people are using Westminster in order to operate within the Labour party in furtherance of their own financial interests. Let me start with Mr. Neale Coleman. He was born Dennis, but I understand that—much to the upset of the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner)—"Dennis" is no longer fashionable, and Neale prefers to be known as "Neale". He was the original objector to the

[Mr. Shaw]

accounts of Westminster council, but, strange as it may seem, the district auditor refused to call him as a witness at the recent hearing.

Mr. Coleman was offered as a witness by the QC, Andrew Arden, acting for the objectors trust, but when it became apparent what questions he would be asked, Mr. Arden suddenly withdrew him.

Mr. Betts: That is irrelevant.

Mr. Shaw: It is very relevant to what was said earlier. Earlier, Opposition Members said that there should be full disclosure—that everyone should volunteer information and appear as a witness—but the Labour party did not allow its own member to be called as a witness. Labour and the district auditor did not want him to appear, and he did not appear in that last hearing that led to the district auditor's final report.

Mr. Neale Coleman has a business that declares in its report and accounts that it is involved in council and voluntary organisation consultancies. He comes from a political family, closely connected with the Labour party. For example, his father ran the Ann Summers chain of sex shops, his mother is currently Labour mayor of Barnet and his brother Iain is currently a Labour political adviser on Islington council and leader of Labour-controlled Hammersmith and Fulham council, which I understand booted out the hon. Member for Pendle. Apparently, this political adviser on Islington council intends to become the non-political mayor of Hammersmith and Fulham council, on £12,000 a year.

Interestingly, Mr. Coleman might be stopped by the Local Government and Housing Act 1989, which states that political advisers on one council should not be councillors on another. That, however, is the way in which the Labour party keeps tabs on what is going on.

We should perhaps admire Neale Coleman in some respects. He is running a successful company: over the past two years, it achieved £400,000 in turnover from council and voluntary organisation consultancies. He uses Stoy Hayward as his auditor, and seems happy with it; but, funnily enough, Stoy Hayward is one of the auditors that Dame Shirley employed to disagree with the district auditor's assessment. It is strange that Mr. Coleman seems both happy and unhappy with Stoy Hayward.

The House might also like to know that, when PC Blakelock was murdered at Broadwater Farm estate, Neale Coleman was there as a political activist. When Dr. Michael Dutt, a councillor at Westminster, took his own life, Neale Coleman was there, also as a political activist. That is the man who is the principal objector to the accounts of Westminster council, a man who is present when people lose their lives in unhappy circumstances.

Ms Glenda Jackson: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. If I understand the hon. Gentleman correctly, he alleges that, at the scene of what the police discovered to be a suicide, another person was present. Surely that could not possibly be the case. To place such a slur on an individual with absolutely no evidence is surely not in accordance with the history of how the House exercises its undoubted privilege.

Madam Deputy Speaker: It cannot be a point of order for the Chair, but perhaps it is an issue on which the hon. Lady would wish to intervene.

Mr. Shaw: The hon. Lady is deliberately trying to obfuscate what I am saying, and is so concerned that it might hit home that she is constantly trying to intervene. I made it clear that Dr. Michael Dutt—*[Interruption.]* Will you listen for a change instead of rabbiting on like a stupid woman?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must remember that he is addressing me and that he cannot address me in that fashion and get away with it.

Mr. Shaw: I would never accuse you, Madam Deputy Speaker, of doing what I have just accused the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson) of doing. I made it clear that Dr. Michael Dutt took his own life in tragic circumstances. I also make it clear that Dr. Dutt took his life because Neale Coleman started the ball rolling when he made the complaint to the district auditor. I shall give further information on his business details in due course.

In 1989, Neale Coleman's partner, Mr. Stephen Hilditch, worked for Labour-controlled Hammersmith council on a restructuring study. Iain Coleman, the brother of Neale Coleman, is a councillor on Hammersmith council and held that position at the time the contract was awarded to Stephen Hilditch. In a letter to *The Guardian*, Stephen Hilditch complained about the difficulties of finance for the Westminster Objectors Trust. He is a director of a company that is pulling in £200,000 a year from local government consultancies. I shall shortly give more information about how those consultancies are obtained.

Neither Neale Coleman nor Stephen Hilditch believes in paying tax on that money. Like some Labour people I have come across, they avoid tax; their accounts show that hardly any money has ended up with the tax man. That is the character of the people who are making accusations about Westminster council. However, they find money to pay sub-contractors' fees.

I do not know whether hon. Members have ever contemplated what happens when political consultancies pay sub-contractors' fees and do not disclose to whom they are paid. Stephen Hilditch and Neale Coleman paid £75,000 in such fees in each of the past two years and donated £2,000, and they have not disclosed in their accounts to whom or what that donation was made.

Councillor Peter Bradley is Labour's parliamentary candidate for The Wrekin and a Westminster councillor, but he does not disclose in the council's register of interests the names of his clients and their interests in the Westminster area. Here is new Labour, with no disclosure at all of councillors' financial interests in a council's register of interests. New Labour means no disclosure. But Mr. Bradley is well known to the fraud squad, which has recently been feeling his collar because he was interviewed as a result of his non-disclosure.

On Westminster's planning committee, Councillor Peter Bradley tried to stop a proposed Waitrose shopping development that would have been near the store of his client, Safeway. He did not declare the interest that he is retained by Safeway: he decided that people should not

know about that if it could be avoided. If it had not been for one or two people who did a little investigative work, no one would have known that he was retained by Safeway.

We may wonder why Safeway thinks that Councillor Peter Bradley, a man with no professional qualification whatever, should be so valuable that it pays him tens of thousands of pounds. Can it be because he is the deputy leader of the Labour group on Westminster council, a Labour activist and a Labour prospective parliamentary candidate, or is it because, as exposed by Andrew Pierce in *The Times* in January 1995, Councillor Bradley has been involved in gerrymandering in Camden's Chalk Farm ward?

Camden has 15,000 unemployed and it needs jobs, but what did Councillor Peter Bradley gerrymander? He produced social housing. He helped Safeway develop social housing and a Safeway store. Hon. Members may wonder why two other proposals, one for the creation of 500 jobs and the other for 700 jobs, were defeated. Councillor Bradley engaged in a fiddle for Safeway in Camden—a gerrymander that the Opposition plainly do not like, because they have been rabbiting on throughout my speech. They are clearly sensitive on this issue, and must feel that there are possibilities for corruption.

Single-handedly, Councillor Peter Bradley obtained planning permission for Safeway, and provided only 200 jobs, although there were alternative schemes for 500 or 700. Some 500 people will live in 202 social housing units. They will be unemployed because no jobs will be created, and they will live near the noise and vibration of a railway line.

Who would propose to build social housing in an area that is scheduled for industrial use unless he intended to gerrymander? Obviously, the railway line will interrupt the peaceful nights of people living there. They will have to put up with noise and vibration, and, because of that and the inconvenience of an industrial area, their children will not be able to play outside.

Mr. Couchman: In whose constituency is Chalk Farm? Is it in the constituency of the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson)?

Mr. Shaw: My hon. Friend makes an interesting intervention. Although it is in the constituency of the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras, the boundary commission attempted to attach that ward to the constituency of the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate. That would have meant that she had more Labour voters, and that was behind the gerrymandering.

The Labour party was not just worried about the ward remaining in Holborn and St. Pancras, but thought that it would go to Hampstead and Highgate under the boundary commission recommendation, and that they had better build some social housing quickly to increase the Labour majority in Hampstead and Highgate.

Ms Glenda Jackson: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for the hon. Gentleman deliberately to misinform the House? The boundary commission proposed to add Chalk Farm ward to Hampstead and Highgate, but my constituents countered that proposal; the boundary commission found in their favour, and the commission gave my constituency another ward.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have explained to the House and to the hon. Lady before that the occupant of the Chair cannot be responsible for the accuracy or otherwise of hon. Members' words. Normally, there is an opportunity for hon. Members either to intervene to challenge what they regard as an inaccuracy or to make a point later in their own speech, if they catch the eye of the occupant of the Chair.

Mr. Shaw: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate for her helpful intervention. She has confirmed what I have said: the ward was possibly going to go into her constituency, and the Labour party was at work gerrymandering it before it went in. It wanted to ensure that, if the Boundary Commission had gone along with the proposal to put it in her constituency, it would have been gerrymandered. That is precisely the point that I was trying to make.

The other point that I am making is that a Labour councillor on Westminster council was acting for Safeway in the gerrymandering process. I hope that, if any of my hon. Friends are going shopping in Safeway—if they ever do after my speech—they will consider that Safeway's directors are paying tens of thousands of pounds to a Westminster Labour councillor, who has no professional qualifications and no known skills that enable him to do the job, other than the fact that he mixes in Labour party circles.

Councillor Peter Bradley, the Westminster councillor, has one other extremely dubious achievement in property circles. In Richmond upon Thames, he has succeeded in helping London and Edinburgh Trust to get out of—

Mr. Grocott: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Shaw: I will in a minute. May I make just this point? [HON. MEMBERS: "He has just walked in."] I know.

Councillor Peter Bradley has acted on behalf of the London and Edinburgh Trust to get it out of a £20 million commitment to Richmond upon Thames's residents. That is what a Westminster councillor is up to in his spare time. He got the trust out of that commitment and, mysteriously, the council lowered the trust's commitment to £2.5 million. The trust saved £17.5 million, and Richmond upon Thames's residents lost on the deal that they were expecting from developers in the region. How was the money for that shady deal reduced from £20 million to £2.5 million, and how much was Councillor Peter Bradley, a man who had no professional qualifications, paid?

Mr. Grocott: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Shaw: The hon. Gentleman has just come into the Chamber. He must listen to the whole of a speech.

Mr. Grocott: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I have just walked into the Chamber and heard the hon. Member for Dover (Mr. Shaw) make all sorts of accusations about an individual who is not, of course, in a position to respond. May we have guidance from you on whether it is an abuse of hon. Members' privileges to attack individuals who cannot reply? More specifically, may we have a ruling from you on whether the hon. Member for Dover, who will not be with us much longer, is prepared to repeat verbatim, outside the House, what he has just said? Will he please answer that question?

Mr. Shaw *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Before the hon. Member for Dover continues, may I say that, in the view of the occupant of the Chair, each Member for Parliament is responsible for what he or she says.

Mr. Grocott: Will the hon. Member for Dover answer the second question, then?

Mr. Shaw: First, if he had any courtesy or any feeling for the House of Commons and its procedures, the hon. Gentleman would have been here for the debate. Secondly, if he had been here, he would have heard Conservative members of Westminster council accused of being serial killers, crooks and other things. What I am calling some of these people is mild in comparison.

Mr. Grocott *rose—*

Mr. Shaw: Sit down. You have had a little bit too much outside in the places where you should not be.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the hon. Member for Dover for the second time that he is addressing me.

Mr. Shaw *rose—*

Mr. Ken Livingstone (Brent, East): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The House definitely just heard the hon. Member for Dover (Mr. Shaw) say that my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mr. Grocott) had had a little bit too much outside. I understand that that is contrary to the rules of the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: It was not clear what it was.

Mr. Shaw: Absolutely. Obviously, the hon. Members for The Wrekin (Mr. Grocott) and for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone), who have just come into the Chamber, should be less sensitive and less worried about what is going on.

Mr. Grocott: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Shaw: I am not going to give way, because I want to finish my concluding points.

I want the House to consider these people.

Mr. Grocott: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman knows the rules of the House well enough. If an hon. Member does not give way, the other hon. Member must resume his seat.

Mr. Grocott: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. What protection is there for people outside the House who are being libelled by the hon. Member for Dover, who, even now, will not answer a simple question: will he repeat outside the precise statements that he has made? If he will not, clearly he is using the protection of parliamentary privilege to abuse and libel other people.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The fact is that parliamentary privilege exists.

Mr. Shaw: I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The consultants whom I have spoken about, Councillor Peter Bradley, former councillor Neale Coleman, and Stephen Hilditch, have a strange way of conducting their business. They do not advertise for business. They do not appear in any directory of consultants that trade in local authority work or any other work. The House of Commons Library has been unable to find any reference to their consultancy businesses other than in the telephone directory. They are not in any local government directory, they do not have professional qualifications, and they do not issue publicity material. It is strange how such people can get business; it appears that the only way in which they can do so is through their Labour party connections. In the past five years, that has given them £1 million-worth of business.

I refer briefly to the fourth objector, Dr. Richard Stone, a company director on Pensioners Link Ltd., the Mangrove Trust, Charta Mede Ltd. and the Foundation for the Care of Victims of Apartheid. Dr. Richard Stone also comes from a traditional Labour family. His father was personal physician to Harold Wilson. He appears regularly on television as a neutral political doctor. He is supposed to be neutral, as he claimed in 1992 on Independent Television News, but he was wrong on two counts. First, he had retired as a doctor and therefore should not have been giving medical views on television at the time; secondly, he was a Labour party member and had been one throughout his active life. I believe that ITN was severely unimpressed about being misled by Dr. Richard Stone.

Those are the four objectors: a misleading doctor who has been in the Labour party all his life and whose family has always been in the Labour party, and three odd consultancy operators who get £1 million-worth of fees in a few years from Labour party connections.

Three firms of accountants have disagreed with the district auditor's figures. I have considered his figures, and, although I have my doubts, I not going to say whether I agree or disagree with them today. Unfortunately, however, the district auditor has a problem of a conflict of interest, which I do not believe has been reported.

The district auditor's company, Touche Ross, has a connected company, Braxton Associates. One of its employees is a former Labour Westminster councillor, Mr. David Pitt-Watson. He is a close political friend of the main objector, Mr. Neale Coleman, because they shared a ward, so the district auditor's connected individual, who works in the group of companies that the district auditor is involved in, is a friend of the main objector.

Mr. Pitt-Watson a still active in the Labour party in Westminster. He was a Labour candidate at the council elections in 1994. He would have had a Labour constituency recently, but he was defeated by an all-woman short list—my colleagues will be upset for Mr. David Pitt-Watson on that basis. The district auditor's conflict in this instance is that the more Mr. Pitt-Watson's friend, Mr. Neale Coleman, objects to the accounts, the more Mr. Pitt-Watson's employing partnership profits through more work for the district auditor. The more Labour objects

to the accounts of Westminster through the friend of one of the employees of a subsidiary of Touche Ross, the more the district auditor's income goes up. As one chartered accountant to another, I must tell Mr. Magill that he has an impossible and appalling conflict of interest.

The four objectors left out of the original 13 are Labour activists. The district auditor has a conflict of interest. The objections are all political and are not founded on a sound or solid legal basis. Three out of the four Labour objectors are earning money through Labour party and Labour council connections. That is appalling. This is not the way to run an audit of any council.

7.50 pm

Mr. John Gunnell (Morley and Leeds, South): We have just been treated to the most disgraceful speech I have ever heard in the House. I have never heard a speech which was less to the point. It concentrated entirely on vilifying the objectors. The hon. Member for Dover (Mr. Shaw) has shown why he has been labelled the vilest man in the House—a label of which I believe he is proud. He has demonstrated that fully and I am appalled that a person can use his privilege as a Member of the House in that way.

Mr. Dobson: Does my hon. Friend agree that anyone who listened to the speech of the hon. Member for Dover should bear in mind the statement of Mr. Nimmo Smith QC who inquired into the things that the hon. Gentleman said about Monklands councillors? He said:

"Mr. David Shaw MP (Dover) had no evidence of substance to offer, notwithstanding repeated references by him to the large amount of information about the Council which he claimed to possess, and notwithstanding his having made reference to the Council's affairs in Parliament on various occasions from late 1992 onwards."

Was not his speech tonight part and parcel of the smear campaign with which he has—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. That was a rather long intervention.

Mr. David Shaw: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. That point has already been made twice by the Labour party in sheer desperation. The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) has just returned from whatever he was doing outside the Chamber to make the point a third time. He did not listen to my speech. Could you—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. That is not a point of order for the Chair.

Mr. Gunnell: I can see that it is a little difficult to get into this debate.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras. As it happens, the quotation has been used before. The hon. Member for Dover spent at least the first 10 or 15 minutes of his speech dealing with Monklands council rather than Westminster council. We should concentrate on matters which affect Westminster council.

Like the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Sir P. Beresford), I have experience of the Audit Commission. I want to comment on the charge made by the hon. Member for Gillingham (Mr. Couchman) that the auditor acted as investigator, prosecutor, judge and jury. I would have expected the Government to have been stronger in their defence of the Audit Commission, which they set up. In my view it has an unparalleled record. It is amazing that no Minister has spoken in favour of the procedures and that it has been suggested that the procedures were weak.

Implicit in the way in which the Audit Commission works is that auditors are asked to judge on non-audit activity. The Audit Commission was set up with specific aims, one of which was to integrate the district audit service with private sector auditing and to bring private sector auditing into local government work. It has done that. Mr. Magill now works for Deloitte Touche and has been involved in local government audit for a considerable time. He has handled matters in Westminster other than that under consideration.

When one starts to say that the Audit Commission is responsible for economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local government, one is widening the judgments that auditors are asked to make. They are asked to discuss not just the economy of services or the financial aspects but to consider and report on matters of effectiveness. On those terms, one cannot reach a judgment purely on financial probity. The way in which the Audit Commission has been set up means that auditors must act in that way.

It is regrettable that the hon. Member for Dover attacked the auditor in this case. John Magill is a senior partner with Deloitte Touche. He has been the firm's legal partner on Audit Commission work since its formation in 1983 and has been appointed auditor to several councils. He has been with the firm since 1969 and became a partner in 1975. He has been the partner in charge of the firm's professional standards function. He has demonstrated his ability in the auditing profession. He does not need the additional work that Westminster has given him over the past few years. I am sure that it makes no difference to what he or his company earns. I believe that the hon. Member for Dover's words were an unmitigated slur.

It is for the Government to say that the Audit Commission has acted properly and to stand by it. John Magill has been amazed by the amount of vilification that he has received from Conservative Members. He was described by someone involved with Westminster as

"'a thin, gaunt man with narrow-rimmed spectacles' inflicting a 'Kafkaesque nightmare' on Westminster Tories."

He has done nothing of the sort. He has tried to discover the truth. In discovering what he believes to be the truth and reporting on it he has clearly upset many people, some of whom are in the House.

As I have said, I expected the Government to be stronger in their support of the Audit Commission. They set it up and it operates according to the rules that they set for it.

Do we need to revise the procedures? I was present as a member of the Audit Commission when section 15 reports were laid down on Liverpool and Lambeth councils. I regretted the decisions those councils made about setting a rate, but I believed that it was right to issue a report which was in the public interest.

There was an earlier report in the public interest on Westminster and the sale of three cemeteries for 15p each. That report came from the same auditor. Those reports

[Mr. Gunnell]

are in the public interest. My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) made it clear that people were directly affected by the policy. Those affected have a right to a report on what happened and why. It is clear that the ratepayers of Westminster have a direct interest in the report. It is right that we should be able to debate the contents of a report that is issued in the public interest.

The Government have said consistently that they cannot comment on the report or the guilt of those concerned because it is going to appeal. The issuing of certificates to the Lambeth and Liverpool councillors took place on 6 September 1985. The Lambeth appeal was not heard in the House of Lords until 5 March 1986, and further judgments on Liverpool councillors were not made in the House of Lords until 1987. Did the Government find that they could not comment on the guilt of Liverpool and Lambeth councillors while the matters were on appeal?

In reply to a private notice question on 2 December 1985, the right hon. Member for Mole Valley (Mr. Baker) said:

"I should be willing to meet a delegation of members from Liverpool city council when they behave reasonably and legally".—[*Official Report*, 2 December 1985; Vol. 88, c. 24.]

He was therefore saying that they had behaved illegally. As a member of the Audit Commission, I believed that they had behaved illegally. Certainly, that was what their Lordships felt. Yet if the Government were consistent, they would not have commented on the matter. The same inconsistency was true of Lord Elton, then a Minister in the Department of the Environment, when he spoke in the House of Lords on 11 December 1985.

Mr. Robert G. Hughes (Harrow, West): Is not the essential difference that those Liverpool councillors always accepted that they were acting illegally, but believed their action to be proper from a political point of view? There was never any doubt that they were acting illegally and the then Secretary of State was therefore right to say what he did.

Mr. Gunnell: It is a question of double standards. There is no doubt that the Liverpool and Lambeth councillors suggested that, on principle, they would not set a poll tax rate because they did not think that they should, given the effect that it would have on the work forces concerned.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Gunnell: Since other hon. Members want to speak and the hon. Member for Dover has taken up rather a lot of the debate, I shall not give way further. The Government were prepared to express clear condemnation in the House, although I agree that there is a difference in the nature of the charges. Is it wise to go to court on such issues as those who have been charged in Westminster by the district auditor have chosen to do? Their behaviour may not only be a local government sin but a crime against the citizens of Westminster.

On Lambeth and Liverpool councils' appeals, the Government took further action—to expedite those appeals. Will the Government take action to expedite the Westminster appeal? Since the matter has gone on for so many years, it is important that it be brought to a conclusion as rapidly as possible. As a member of the Audit Commission, I was told that every possible means was being used to conclude matters concerning Lambeth and Liverpool as speedily as possible. I want to be sure that the Government are acting in the same way—I trust that the commission will act in the same way, too—over Westminster city council and that they will do their level best to expedite proceedings so that we may receive the sort of answers that we want.

We should remember that Westminster city council was already very experienced in matters affecting the district auditor as a result of the cemeteries case, which found that, as such, Westminster council had not acted improperly. The auditor found that there was a regrettable handling of the sale for which members and officers were responsible, a regrettable lack of commercial awareness, and that council officers were so overawed by certain council members that they did not feel that they could say unpalatable things that council members did not want to hear. That is relevant to this Westminster case as well.

We should not judge the result of the appeal in advance, but the Government could make it very clear that they expect people who are under investigation by auditors to co-operate. The ways in which the council was deliberately unco-operative in the investigation have been obvious because they have been catalogued by the district auditor. The Government should condemn that.

The details of notes that were passed—they are certainly included in John Magill's 2,000-page report that the right hon. Member for City of London and Westminster, South (Mr. Brooke) may have read but to which others have not had access—referred clearly to actions that were thought to be illegal. Indeed, the officers who wrote of them said that they had to be made legal. I shall confine myself to only a few examples of that.

In 1987, Lady Porter made it clear that the "donkey work" for the designated sales had been done, and said:

"all I had to do, as I had the personality, was to get it through the Committee".

It was said that it was her intention to gain electoral advantage by selling more properties in marginal wards.

At a strategy weekend, probably at Oxford, which was attended by officers, a paper written by Lady Porter entitled "Setting the Scene" was discussed. In that, she stated:

"We face a tremendous challenge. The electoral register for the 1990 elections will be compiled in just over two years' time. Some very ambitious policies must be implemented by then: providing a great deal of affordable housing in key areas; protecting the electoral base in other areas . . . There is very little time to achieve these radical policy objectives."

I agree that people take political decisions, but it is clear that people should not use council money to implement such decisions. Council money was used to empty properties and allocate grants, and rehouse people in bed-and-breakfast accommodation. I can easily imagine that there will be disputes about the actual figure, but it is indisputable that it runs into many millions of pounds. I am certainly prepared to accept that John Magill is better at arithmetic than we are in the House.

I accept the figure of £31.6 million, which is a staggering amount to be spent in the pursuance of the policy. What is illegal is that council resources were used to fund a politically driven policy to achieve electoral gain. People will say at the appeal that they were not

responsible for the policy, but they cannot contest the fact that the policy was pursued or that the things written about it were not written. The appeal will have to consider the notes, who were the authors, who was responsible and who was implicitly involved in the policy.

I think that the matter will go to the Court of Appeal. I hope that the Government will expedite matters to help it proceed as rapidly as possible. The Government should support the district audit service and make clear that the district auditor has in no way behaved differently from how we would expect him to behave. Hon. Members should be praising him for the meticulous way in which he has examined—despite the obstructions—all the affairs and reports in detail, as the right hon. Member for City of London and Westminster, South has said. The right hon. Gentleman said that the district auditor's work was meticulous. He is the only person who has made it clear that the work has been very good. I would have hoped that the Government could assert that whoever is in political control, it is the role of the district audit service to make it clear that there is probity in local government. That was allegedly the reason why they set the Audit Commission to work—to extend the concept of financial probity to cover an examination of services in terms of value for money.

According to those terms, Mr. Magill has found that Westminster city council's policy was pursued for electoral advantage, and we must accept that that is the case. That being so, it is up to the courts to decide who was personally guilty of perpetrating that policy and foisting it upon the council.

8.9 pm

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Morley and Leeds, South (Mr. Gunnell), who has a distinguished record both in local government and as a member of the Audit Commission. It is entirely typical of the hon. Gentleman that he managed to cut through much of the froth surrounding the debate and get to the central problem. He asked why Conservative Members were reluctant to condemn the people named in the report, and why there may seem to be some inconsistency between our position now and our attitude to the former Liverpool councillors.

The exchange between the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Hughes) went to the heart of the problem: the difference is that the Westminster councillors say that they are not guilty. They do not believe or accept that they have broken the law, whereas the former Liverpool councillors accepted that they were deliberately breaking the law. They did so on principle, because they did not believe in the law or support it. That is the difference.

The hon. Member for Barking (Ms Hodge) seemed bemused, and asked about our reluctance, but I have given her the answer, although I cannot put it in quite such elegant terms as did the hon. Member for Morley and Leeds, South. We are unhappy about Opposition Members' determination to nail those six people to the tumbrils, and even more unhappy because they seem to want to throw in some extra bodies for good measure.

We prefer to wait until the court system is exhausted before we attribute guilt. The exchange between the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) and my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mr. Shaw) also went to the heart of that problem, because when the hon. Member for Newbury said that the people concerned were guilty, my hon. Friend rightly asked, "Where does it say guilty?" The hon. Member for Newbury could not tell him.

At that point I thought that I heard the hon. Member for Cardiff, Central (Mr. Jones), who was on the Opposition Front Bench, say that that did not matter. He said something like "So what?" But guilt does matter; it is important, and it is only right that we should condemn people only when the legal system has been exhausted.

It is a shame that great works of literature are sometimes over-quoted in the Chamber. People so often refer to an "Alice in Wonderland" situation that when that description is precisely applicable to something, one sounds a little coy when one uses it. But it describes exactly what is happening now. In the great trial scene in "Alice in Wonderland", with the Red Queen, we read words to the effect of "We don't want to hear the evidence or the judgment; we want the sentence first. Let's have the sentence before we look at the evidence." And that is what we hear now: "Never mind about the trial, the evidence or peoples' civil rights. Let's have the verdict."

We have heard how upset Opposition Members were when my hon. Friend the Member for Dover named Labour members of Westminster council. We have the same feeling about naming the people in the report. They are entitled to a fair hearing at a fair trial.

Mr. Brooke: I am sorry that the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) is not in the Chamber now, but he did not give way to me during his fairly vicious attack on Ministers. Does my hon. Friend recall the debate in the Liberal Cabinet over the Marconi scandal, when it was said that the Tories were too stupid to take advantage of it? Winston, who of course had previously sat on the Conservative Benches, said, "Yes, some of them are too stupid"—then he paused for a moment and thought, and added, "But all of them are too nice."

Mr. Pickles: My right hon. Friend's knowledge of contemporary history far exceeds mine, but that story has the ring of truth about it. I certainly thought that the hon. Member for Newbury brought some light to fairly dark proceedings when he suggested that the whole procedure could have been avoided if only there had been proportional representation. My mind went back to an old sketch from "Not the Nine O'Clock News", in which a "Question Time" audience was told that the world was about to end. The Liberal spokesman said that the real tragedy of Armageddon was that millions of people would die without ever having had the opportunity to enjoy a fair voting system.

The added ingredient in the story has been Lady Porter. After all, she was the nemesis of the Labour party in London. She did not suffer fools gladly, and was not a quiet retiring leader; she was prepared to take the Labour party on. Ratepayers in London benefited to the tune of millions of pounds because of Lady Porter's willingness to stop the Greater London council spending large sums in its last few days of existence—the so-called "tombstone funding".

It seems distasteful that people should be judged and convicted without a hearing, and without an opportunity to defend themselves.

Mr. Livingstone: May I put the record straight? Lady Porter took the GLC to court to object to the fact that we

[Mr. Livingstone]

intended to give £100 million to voluntary organisations. She won the case, so we gave the money to housing associations.

Mr. Pickles: I think that the hon. Gentleman's recollection is wrong, because Lady Porter lost the case, but still stopped the council giving the money away.

Mr. Robert G. Hughes: I was in court when the injunction was obtained, and although the case was not won, the point was, because by the time the injunction had been cleared the GLC had been abolished, the law had gone through, and the council could not and did not give the funding out, so the ratepayers got the money back.

Mr. Pickles: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention.

What I find distasteful is the way in which the Labour party is using the system to crush six individuals. What adds the extra spice is no doubt the fact that we are talking about the Tesco heiress, whom the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) described as a fat cat.

The law should apply equally both to the Tesco heiress and to the person on the checkout at Tesco. The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras quoted the words written over the door of the Old Bailey, but the last time I looked at the Old Bailey there was a lady standing on top of it—the symbol of justice. She carries the symbols of justice in both hands, and her eyes are blindfolded. It is important that everybody has the right to justice, regardless of his or her means.

During proceedings on the private notice question last week, the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras pledged that a future Labour Government would hold a public inquiry, although he did not repeat that pledge today. I think that he is nodding, acknowledging that to be true. However, what I thought he was offering was a political show trial. It was clear to me that he was not interested in the evidence or in justice, but simply in seeing the individuals concerned twist in the wind.

Mr. Dobson: If the hon. Gentleman had been listening last Thursday, when the private notice question was asked, he would know that I was concerned not about the six individuals—they should be dealt with under the law passed by the Government in 1982 to apply to anybody, whether a person has a lot of money or none—but about the relations between central Government and Westminster, which have been corrupt throughout.

Mr. Pickles: I refer the hon. Gentleman to column 368 of *Hansard* for 9 May, in which the context of what he suggested is clear. He might not have intended to do so, but he advocated a political show trial.

If those six people are ultimately found guilty by a court, I make it absolutely clear that I will condemn them, the Conservative party will condemn them and, I have no doubt, the Secretary of State will condemn them. But I am totally certain that we will not have any business about trying to change the law retrospectively—such as we had in 1975 with the housing finance special provisions, when an attempt was made not only to remove the disqualification of councillors but to remove some of the financial burdens placed on them. The Conservative party will not do that if the appeals fail.

We are told that the right of appeal is unusual. We are told that, because it is unusual, we have a right to comment. But it is unusual for people to appeal in civil cases and it is unusual for people to go for judicial reviews against decisions of the Secretary of State, but they still do it. One cannot pray in aid the judicial service when it suits and dismiss it when it is inconvenient.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Does my hon. Friend agree with me that the purpose of the judicial appeal mechanism in this case is that the auditor is not legally qualified and it is not a judicial process? It is, therefore, necessary to confirm that through the judiciary when it is not agreed.

Mr. Pickles: My hon. and learned Friend, who is a distinguished lawyer, is quite right on that point.

I support the points made about Mr. Magill by my right hon. Friend the Member for City of London and Westminster, South (Mr. Brooke). But just because one has doubts about the way in which he proceeded does not in any way strike at his professional competence. I have the mildest of criticisms of Mr. Magill. I think that it was a mistake to hold that press conference during the preliminary hearing. I think that it was an error of judgment and that it tainted his impartiality. I was very pleased that he did not repeat the same mistake at the full hearing. We all learn from our mistakes, but I am not sure that that undid the damage. On matters of investigation, form is just as important as substance.

Sir Irvine Patnick (Sheffield, Hallam): My hon. Friend is knowledgeable about local government. Is it normal for a district auditor to hold a press conference before he has completed his report? Possibly the hon. Member for Morley and Leeds, South (Mr. Gunnell), a former member of the Audit Commission, is aware of previous cases in which a press conference has been held by a district auditor.

Mr. Pickles: It is a very unusual situation and, as I said, I think that it was a mistake. I am sure that the district auditor did not intend it to turn out in the way that it did and that it is a lesson for future district auditors on how they must conduct themselves.

We have heard of Westminster council's excellent record on provision and taking care of applications from the homeless.

I should like to talk a little about politics in local government, because I think that that goes to the heart of this inquiry and raises questions as to whether politics are inappropriate in local government and whether political parties should use their office to pursue popular political policies.

If one starts with the parish council, it is possible not to have political parties involved and to run them with some pragmatism. Their functions, budgets and geographical areas in which they deal are very limited. I regret those areas of the country in which politics and the politicisation of parish councils have become commonplace. But with larger councils, such as the metropolitan authorities and the county councils, some of their budgets are larger than the total budgets of many of

the states in the United States of America. A policy of steady as she goes—or, put slightly more poetically by Alexander Pope:

"For forms of government let fools contest;

Whate'er is best administer'd is best"—

is simply not satisfactory.

Politics means choice in local government. We should not be ashamed of offering political choice to the electorate. Each party has its view, puts candidates up for election and it is supported or it is rejected. I should like to compare that against three popular policies.

If the previous 17 years are marked by anything, it should perhaps be by the extension of share ownership. That extension was brought about by the Conservatives to persuade more people to vote Conservative, to increase the number of share owners and to accomplish the aim of a property-owning democracy with shares. We now have more share owners in this country than we have members of trade unions. That was a blatantly political act to get votes and to increase the number of people who were Conservatives.

The right to buy goes at the very heart of the problem. It was a great touchstone between the political parties in the 1970s and the 1980s, although it is less so now. Implementing that policy was bitterly fought out. It was an attempt to persuade more people to vote Conservative than Labour. The same is true of the great debate taking place on grant-maintained schools.

We are pursuing the grant-maintained policy because we believe that it is right for schools, but we also believe that the more parents have their children educated at grant-maintained schools the more likely they are to vote Conservative. There have been some references to the Birmingham case. When the Labour group was challenged about its policy document "Meeting Needs", the district auditor said that it was lawful and that the Labour group

"was indeed trying to improve its standing with the electorate following poor results in May 1992, but we find nothing wrong with this principle in a democratic system. It is normal for any political party to revise its policies to reflect the views of the electorate as expressed in the ballot box."

He went on to say:

"The crucial test is whether all such schemes were subsequently properly authorised by committee or by Chief Officers under delegated powers. We are satisfied that the overall budget of £7.2 million was properly authorised and that most of the schemes were approved by the service committees."

So when is it not appropriate to have politics in local government? I think that it is inappropriate to determine whether one will help someone on the basis of how they voted. The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Mr. Wareing) spoke about that matter earlier. When people come to my advice bureau, I do not ask them how they voted. I do not look them up on our mark register to check how they voted. I certainly do not say to them, "You didn't vote for me—I'm not going to help you." In Brentwood and Ongar, I represent the whole community: Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, Labour voters and those who voted for the Green candidate.

I can recall that there was a trend in local government when Labour councillors would say that they did not represent Tories in their wards, and say "I represent my class on council. I represent the working class, and those who are not working class cannot come to me for help." That is an example of when politics is inappropriate.

Mr. Rendel: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Pickles: We are pressed for time. It is not that I do not like the hon. Gentleman, and it is nice to see him back in the Chamber, but we are pressed for time. The Labour Whip is getting a little anxious, and I am coming to my conclusion—but we can, all of us, have a chat afterwards.

I also believe that it would quite wrong to design a service just to service those areas that voted for one. That is absolutely and completely wrong. It is wrong to designate the way in which dustbins are emptied or schools allocated purely on the basis of how an area votes. That is an area in which politics is inappropriate.

We have a system of local government and not of local administration. Government means choice; politics means choice. There is a right for the electorate to make those choices. I believe that this appeal, when it goes to court, will give us an opportunity to firmly establish the right of politics in local government.

8.29 pm

Mr. Clive Betts (Sheffield, Attercliffe): I wish to refer to matters in the district auditor's report, a report that was drawn up through due process according to an Act passed by the House, introduced by this Government. We understand that the reason why the six people are appealing to the courts is that the district auditor came to a decision which is legally enforceable. The decision now stands that they misused funds, that they did it for the purpose of gerrymandering, and that in the course of doing so they ignored their responsibilities to homeless families.

However, this is not just a little local difficulty for people in Westminster or Westminster councillors or officials. It is a matter for the Government. Whether or not they choose to deal with the issues now, at some stage the Government will have to come back to the House and explain their part in this sorry process. Throughout the period of the policy on which the district auditor reported the Government knew about the policy, they were advised of it and were consulted about it. They were asked for and gave approval about certain aspects of the policy.

It is clear that, apart from the up-front issues, which we can discuss because they are on record, Westminster councillors and officials and local Members of Parliament did a great deal of lobbying behind the scenes with Ministers, their advisers and civil servants. It is on record that the right hon. Member for Westminster, North (Sir J. Wheeler) was involved in those discussions.

The basis of local authorities' housing programme strategies is the housing investment programme statement. The Government obtain information from local authorities to draw up the statement. I have been looking through the statements submitted by Westminster council for the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. They are interesting documents. They show a change of policy following the discussions in Westminster and the decision that the council took in July 1987. They show a clear change from a policy of simply selling properties to one of social engineering. That was the purpose. Of course,

[Mr. Clive Betts]

they did not mention political gerrymandering. That gives the lie to those who say that Westminster was merely behaving in a political way. None of the issues of gerrymandering came up front. They were all in hidden, secret documents.

The public documents certainly talked about social engineering and trying to help a middle group of people within Westminster, even though at the same time the council was using its planning policies to ensure that private developments were built not for middle-income families but for rich and affluent families.

Sir Irvine Patnick: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Betts: I am sorry. Much as I should like to, I shall not give way to the hon. Gentleman because I am on limited time and I wish to allow my colleagues who have been sitting here throughout the debate an opportunity to speak.

As well as outlining the change of approach, the strategy statements outline the increase in the target to 500 sales per year and the general intention to sell 1,800 properties per year. They also outline the cash incentive scheme as well as the designated sales scheme. That information was all passed on to the Government. They were consulted about it. They were asked for at least tacit approval, in the sense that they made their HIP allocations on the basis of those strategy statements. Indeed, the Government gave extra allocations to Westminster and sought to justify them by pointing to Westminster's appropriate and successful policies. That is how the Government were involved throughout the process.

However, despite the sales policy, homelessness in Westminster was acute. The strategy documents reveal that more than £7 million per year was being spent on housing homeless families in temporary accommodation. Even in 1989, there were more than 700 families in temporary accommodation. That more than doubled in a five-year period once the homes-for-votes programme got under way.

There was a recognition that there was a problem of homelessness and that people had to be exported to other boroughs. Letters were written to the Secretary of State advising that Westminster could not cope under the homeless persons legislation and asking the Government to change it. Requests were made for special capital allocations to provide hostels outside the borough. The most famous such allocation was the Government's attempt to give, outside their own guidelines, more than £1 million to provide a hostel in Croydon for Westminster's homeless families. It never got off the ground because there was a political row with the then leader of Croydon council about putting the hostel in his ward.

A letter from Westminster to the Department of the Environment said:

"To embark on such a large scale property designation we will reduce the number of properties available to meet the demand for social housing . . . If the designation policy is to be pursued alternative solutions to the homelessness crisis in Westminster will have to be found."

So all the information that the Government received showed that the sales policy that Westminster was pursuing was causing it a real problem in coping with its homelessness and that it would require action from the Government to solve that difficulty.

Despite all that information, under section 32 of the Local Government Act 1985 the Government approved the designated sales policy. They argued about the sell-on values of properties, but they gave approval. They specifically approved allowing the right-to-buy discounts that would be available to a family if they bought the house that they lived in to be passed on if the family bought one of the properties in the designated blocks. They approved that change to the normal approach.

The Government had issued guidance to the effect that where grants were given to families to buy a vacant property under any sales policy, the properties vacated by families who came from other council properties should be given to homeless families. That guidance was also broken by the Department of the Environment. It never bothered under its monitoring procedures to pull Westminster up and say that the net result of its policy was to deny homeless families homes instead of releasing vacant properties to house them.

Westminster began to operate the cash incentives policy under section 137 powers. It was advised by its own lawyers that the policy was illegal. It continued the policy under section 129 of the Housing Act 1988. Implementation of the policy required specific consent from the Government. The district auditor's report is full of a series of correspondence between Westminster and the Government between 17 July 1987, when Westminster first asked for approval, and August 1988, when it was given approval. The reason for that correspondence, and why initially the Government refused to give approval but eventually did, was that Westminster had to get round the words in the legislation.

Under the cash incentives scheme, where people were given a cash grant to move to another property, the property which they left had to be let to a homeless family. The Government colluded in getting round the words. They produced a review in 1990-91 of what happened to the cash incentives scheme. It showed that fewer than 40 per cent. of the properties vacated under the scheme went to homeless families. More than a third went neither to a homeless family nor to a council tenant in Westminster who moved over, as the Government's policy should have required.

Despite that review, the Government gave Westminster council £4.5 million of extra capital allocations in the early 1990s to follow that policy through. The policy was operated contrary to their own guidance, but the Government gave consent to Westminster to do so under powers in section 129 of the Housing Act 1988. Nothing was done, despite the fact that the Government were providing housing subsidy to implement the policy.

So the Government knew what was happening through information that they received under the housing investment programme. They gave extra capital allocations. They gave consent to the cash incentive grants. They gave consent to the grants to purchase vacant properties. They gave consent to a £1.3 million allocation for a hostel to house homeless families in another borough because Westminster complained that it would not have anywhere to put homeless families because it was selling the flats in which such families should have been housed.

At the same time, the Government, tolerant of that waste of money and the fact that homeless families were being ignored, entered into discussions to set up a Westminster housing trust, even though officers advised

councillors that it was illegal. The purpose was to subsidise private landlords to gentrify blocks of flats and let them on to residents of Westminster or others, according to a process which would be controlled by the local Conservative party through the trust. That, too, was discussed actively with Ministers.

While all that was happening, the head of the policy unit in Westminster was a Mr. Phillips, who was on secondment from the Department of the Environment. No one could believe that he was not reporting back to his masters in the Department of the Environment about the policies that he was pursuing. Mr. Phillips eventually became the managing director and was replaced by Mr. Reiter, another appointment from the Department of the Environment, in furthering those policies.

There is no doubt that throughout all this business, the Government knew what was happening. They had the information. They were lobbied; they gave approval; they monitored what was happening by reports such as that to which I referred and they did nothing about it. No doubt they will eventually claim that they did not know everything that was being done. Despite having the evidence, they never put any concern on the record or took any action to stop the abuses that were so apparent to everyone when they were happening in Westminster.

The Secretary of State told us that it is not the right time to condemn Westminster. He will wait for the rest of the legal process to be worked through. While he is waiting, perhaps he could consider carefully the role of his Department and the Government. When it is time for the Government to apologise for what Westminster council has done, perhaps we can have an apology for their actions in this sorry and sordid mess.

8.40 pm

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford): I shall be brief because I know that other hon. Members wish to speak. There are so many facts flying around that I do not intend to follow all of them—especially, hon. Members may be pleased to hear, those raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mr. Shaw), notwithstanding that some of his most illustrative facts will stay in our memories for some time to come, not least because of the way in which he made his points.

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for City of London and Westminster, South (Mr. Brooke), who made an excellent speech, I wish to discuss one or two points. First, there is the process enacted by the House in 1982, which has been so devalued during this case, and the effect of the application of the auditor's report. That is a three-stage process. The Government are right to wait to apportion final judgment and blame because the key point is that the process was set up with a final judicial element so that if those accused did not agree, they had the full right to take their case to the judiciary and get a fair, impartial final hearing. After all, the person who sat at the oral hearing was the same person who had carried out the investigation. The difference from the cases of people who have been accused in the past is that many of them did not disagree with the finding of illegality.

As regards stage one, the auditor's provisional report, the most important thing—apart from making the mistake of giving a press conference—is that when the initial findings were made available they were made available only to the accused and those who had brought the original charges. It is important to note that the findings in the provisional report were covered by criminal sanction, quite rightly, because they were provisional. Otherwise, it would have been impossible for those who were accused to mount any sort of defence if they were vilified in public. However, immediately on the night the provisional findings appeared, in the media—and especially on "Panorama"—direct quotations were made from the report, which was covered by this criminal sanction.

I have serious questions for my hon. Friend the Minister as to what was going on with the Law Officers when it was clear that a provisional report was being breached and quoted selectively in the media and by members of public. From that moment, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Mr. Legg) and others who were accused had the most difficult uphill task to pursue their defence because of public vilification in the media and by hon. Members who should have known better. That all happened despite the fact that specific elements from the report were covered by a criminal sanction—and nothing was done about it.

It is important to note the role of the Opposition Front Bench spokesmen, the hon. Members for Durham, North-West (Ms Armstrong) and for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), in concerting much of the vilification. I hope that at some stage they will have the decency to accept that my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West was exonerated and that they were wrong to attempt to concert such vilification on the back of provisional report charges that have not stood in the final report.

The most important point about stage two, the public inquiry and findings, in which my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West has been exonerated, is that there has been no apology. The most important charge was whether he should have been surcharged. In the final findings, his name has been deleted from those who have been surcharged. There has been no mention of that fact. The Opposition have been winding around it, each trying to find an angle from which to accuse my hon. Friend.

The hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) made one of the nastiest and most vicious speeches that I have heard in this place. It was unnecessary and ridiculous because he attempted to malign my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West on the basis of a report that the hon. Gentleman had not read in full. I draw his attention to pages 383 to 412, which contained the detailed legal advice. If he had read them, he would have found that the matter was very complex. The selective piece that the auditor used at the end is open to serious criticism, but that is something with which others will deal.

I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for City of London and Westminster, South that Mr. Magill has been meticulous at each stage of the three-stage process. He has pursued the job that he was given with the utmost care and his report has every imaginable detail in it. The charges that he makes on the back of that can now be examined by an impartial adjudicator. The question is not whether he was meticulous or behaved correctly—I have no doubt about that—but whether he should be able to act throughout as judge, jury and, ultimately, executioner. That is our real problem. I was not here in 1982, but I have long had considerable reservations about what we did in changing the nature of the relationship of councillors to the job that they are elected to do. The

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process is fine when guilt has been admitted, but when it has not we are in great difficulty. My criticisms of the system are for the Government to note for the future.

The report took some seven years to produce, and all sorts of assumptions and innuendoes have been made during that time. It cost £3 million. Unlimited costs were available to the auditor, but not to those who stood accused.

Mr. Couchman: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Duncan Smith: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I do not wish to take long as other hon. Members wish to speak.

The auditor had unlimited money at his disposal, but that was not the case for those who stood accused. If they disagreed with it, as many did, they faced great costs both in the original investigation and when they appeared before the inquiry after the provisional findings. They had to engage extremely expensive legal advice. That is not necessarily wrong, but it is almost unique that they have no chance of getting back any of the money used in respect of the findings and the inquiry when they are proved innocent of the charges. That is contrary to natural justice.

Ministers should not forget Dr. Dutt, who committed suicide, according to the notes that he left behind, because he could not see how he could afford to defend himself. Intriguingly, Judith Warner, a co-vice chairman, has subsequently been exonerated. That is a human tragedy which we may at some stage need to consider.

The real problem with the system, and I say this to Ministers in a constructive spirit, lies in the process from the provisional finding to the final report. The public inquiry stage is where the auditor goes into a quasi-judicial process without being qualified so to do. The problems lie in the cost structure in the period between provisional and final findings. We should make certain that auditors produce reports which are not provisional but can be acted upon in the courts. Reports should not serve as a quasi-judicial stage between provisional and final findings, which is where most of the difficulties lay. When we look back over these events, we shall see that the media managed to make ridiculous allegations, many of which have been proved to be unfounded during this period.

It is important to acknowledge that my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South–West has been exonerated, on which I congratulate him, and that the third stage of the process must now be engaged. The accused individuals have said that they are not guilty. They must be subject to the due process of law. If they are found guilty, they should be sanctioned accordingly. If they are not found guilty, I hope that members of the Opposition Front Bench and others will have the decency, as they should, to apologise.

8.50 pm

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): I have been sickened by the debate. Conservative Members do not have the guts to condemn the events in question, and all Conservatives are implicated. The district auditor proved that there had been gerrymandering to win the 1990 council elections. The right hon. Member for Mole Valley (Mr. Baker), a previous Secretary of State for the Environment, was chairman of the Conservative party in 1990 and masterminded the national strategy. In the right hon. Gentleman's book, "The Turbulent Years", published in 1993 and now remaindered, he wrote:

"We"—

meaning the Conservative party—

"focused especially on the high-profile councils of Westminster and Wandsworth, where the Tories were led with verve by Shirley Porter and Paul Beresford. With spirit and imagination both had cut back expenditure but had improved services. They were the flagships of efficiency in local government."

There is too much riding on the credibility of the Conservative party for it to do what is right and to condemn corruption.

On 9 May Conservative central office published a paper to brief Conservative Members for this debate. It is an apology for what happened, and it tells Conservative Members that they should raise this key point:

"The allegations in the report concern events which took place almost a decade ago."

What about the families who were moved into asbestos-ridden flats? They do not care whether those events occurred a decade or 20 years ago. The brief continues:

"The specific allegations in the report are a matter for councillors and officers concerned, the Council, the Auditor and the electors of Westminster, and not for the Government."

That is untrue—the Government are up to their elbows in it. Most astonishing of all, the brief advises Conservative Members to tell the House :

"This is not a party political issue."

But it is.

The auditor found six individuals guilty. There has been much ignorant talk by Conservative Members, including lawyers who should know better. The hon. Member for Gillingham (Mr. Couchman) ludicrously described Shirley Porter and the others as "the Westminster Six", as though we should feel sorry for them. The hon. Member for Chingford (Mr. Duncan Smith) is also a lawyer. I refer both hon. Gentleman to the Government document "Spending Public Money" published in March—not by the Department of the Environment, but by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the Financial Secretary to the Treasury.

That command paper specifically examines surcharging in local government. It draws a distinction between section 19, which concerns unlawful expenditure that can be referred to the courts, and section 20, which concerns wilful misconduct. The auditor found the six guilty of wilful misconduct. Under section 20, it is possible for the auditor to bring in a finding of guilt. Let us not quarrel about semantics. The auditor said that Shirley Porter and the other gallery of rogues at Westminster were guilty of unauthorised behaviour to the detriment of local taxpayers. The auditor's report runs to five volumes. I have not been able to read through them all, but I dipped into enough of the report to realise that the six are guilty. If they want to exercise their right to appeal, the law allows that—but let us not resile from the auditor's finding, to which Ministers will not admit, that the six were guilty.

The auditor unearthed a bundle of documents. I will offer a couple of key quotations. Shirley Porter stated:

"A key element in building stable communities must be to attract home owners into Westminster. This means finding innovative ways of ensuring that the right sort of housing is available to the right sort of buyer or tenant. And it must be available by October 1989."

What is the significance of October 1989? That was when the electoral register for the 1990 council elections in London was closed.

We heard an infantile contribution from the hon. Member for Dover (Mr. Shaw), whose facts are constantly wrong. He said that the councillors dealt with matters of grand strategy and that the details were handled by council officers. It is a pity that the hon. Gentleman is not in his place to hear this. Notes unearthed by the auditor report an informal meeting on 1 September 1987 of chairmen of council committees—the people who were not supposed to deal with detail. One note stated:

"Agreed: Officers to look at the implications of emptying Bruce House as quickly as possible and disposing of the property through the Housing Trust for conversion into 'Yuppie' flats . . . Agreed: (a) Head of Policy Unit"—

a council officer—

"would make sure that the 'right people' in the 'right' Housing Associations were identified."

Shirley Porter, who sat at the centre of that web of deceit wrote:

"What is gentrification? In short it is ensuring that the right people live in the right areas. The areas are relatively easy to define: target wards identified on the basis of electoral trends and results."

The council's officers picked up the message that they were supposed to behave as Shirley Porter and the rest decreed, which is why there were appalling memorandums from people who should have known better. One from the special chief officers board, dated 25 September 1986—to which my hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) referred—stated:

"Homelessness. Be mean and nasty."

Westminster council was a flagship that the Conservative Government could not see sunk, but it is now holed below the waterline. The Conservatives won the 1990 election because of a massive manipulation of the grant system, which is why the council could introduce a low poll tax. I shall cite a set of statistics in this regard. In 1990—the year of the election that Shirley Porter and the others wanted to gerrymander unlawfully and improperly—my local authority, Pendle council, received £856 per head in total external support from the Government, and that is in an area which experiences deprivation and poverty.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment (Sir Paul Beresford): It is totally unlike Westminster.

Mr. Prentice: No, it is not. These are figures from the House of Commons Library and from the Department of the Environment. If anyone is ignorant of the facts, it is the Minister. In 1990, Wandsworth council received £1,424 per head in total external support from the Government. In 1990, Westminster council—where the corruption took place—received £1,638 per head in total external support from the Government. That is why Westminster council was able to bring in a poll tax of £195, compared with £300 in my authority, in that crucially important year of 1990.

It is a sorry tale, and the thing that disappoints me more than anything is that Conservative Members have been steeped in sleaze for so long that they fail to identify it when it is staring them in the face. It is all very well for the Minister to wrinkle his brow and shake his head. I invite him to go to the House of Commons Library and to read the five reports of the district auditor. They describe the guilt of those six people.

8.59 pm

Mr. Barry Field (Isle of Wight): I had not intended to speak in the debate until I heard the putrescent piece of politics that emanated from the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) when he attacked my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Mr. Legg) last week. It was the most disgraceful behaviour that I have seen from any Liberal Democrat since I have been in this place—and I have seen quite a few examples over the years.

When I entered this House I discovered that when the Conservatives took control of Medina borough council the constituency secretary of my predecessor, Stephen Ross—who had a lot to do with housing—had been chairman of the housing committee of the council. When tenancies were allocated to residents of Medina borough council they regularly received a letter which led them to believe that their Member of Parliament had obtained that allocation for them. Councillor Ian Morgan—the leader of the council in those days—took me to see some of the tenants to discuss it with them because they were convinced that their Member of Parliament was allocating the housing tenancies. I did not complain about that. It was a wonderful wheeze actually: catch as catch can.

The hon. Member for Newbury attacked my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West, who has been exonerated by the report. The attack was quite horrific. When we took control of Medina borough council we found that some starter homes had been sold off in a great big rush, so much so that the councillors came to see me and asked whether there should be a district auditor's report.

A number of the people who bought the starter homes already had homes on the Isle of Wight. I knocked on three doors and found that people who had been sold starter homes at a discounted price already had dwellings or tenancies elsewhere on the Isle of Wight. When I asked them why they had taken them on, they said that the price might appreciate and they might make a profit.

As often happens when there is a change of political control, there is an air of "We are in charge now," and it was all forgotten, but it should have been the subject of a district auditor's report. As the hon. Member for Newbury knows perfectly well—because I have written to the leader of the Liberal Democrats—there was a district auditor's report into the council on the Isle of Wight. He sits there smirking smugly, but he made an unpleasantly vicious attack on a colleague in the House. His party had refused to publish the report. He should wash his mouth out because we are fed up with that kind of putrescent politics from the Liberal Democrats.

When I was chairman of the housing committee I bought a large estate from the Greater London council when it was being wrapped up. I have watched this sort of process over the years. I put a lot of effort into getting that housing transferred to the housing association as I

[Mr. Barry Field]

did not want to allocate the tenancies. I do not want to gerrymander the system. I want for my constituents the best possible housing service, the best repair record and the fewest voids. The person who objected to that was the leader of the Liberal Democrats. Why? It was because he realised that a transfer of responsibility for housing was a transfer of power, and the Liberal Democrats wanted power over people's lives. They like gerrymandering: housing tenancies represented votes in wards that were crucial to them. That is why the Liberal Democrats did not like responsibility for housing being transferred to an independent body that would allocate homes, not on that basis, but on merit, and which would run things properly. Everyone, bar a few really ideologically motivated characters, now agrees that it is a great improvement.

I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that one thing has really surprised me in the debate that has taken place last week and this week in the House and in the national press. Some of us are old enough to remember when the Greater London council promised that it would build out Conservative majorities using housing around London and with the Greater London council seaside homes policy. The sum involved was not £31 million. If my memory serves me right—I have eaten a lot of beef lately, so it might be failing me—it was about £300 million to £500 million. That was an enormous scam; it was gerrymandering in the crudest sense of the word and it was stated to be so. Such scams are as old as time itself. Remarkably, we have not heard a dicky-bird about that GLC policy in the debate on this issue.

Mr. Livingstone: If this was all a wicked Labour plot by the Greater London council to build houses around the suburbs and in the south-east, why did the Conservatives continue those estate developments when they won control of the council in 1967? They did so for the simple reason that the previous Labour administration had done so. There was a vast waiting list in London, and in those days all political parties were competing to build more council houses because they believed in doing justice for tenants who needed places to live.

Mr. Field: The hon. Gentleman was wrong once tonight, and he is wrong again. As he well knows from his long experience of local government, a council cannot put the brakes on existing contracts overnight. He also knows how popular our policy on the right to buy has been; and my goodness, if anything will put a stop to all this gerrymandering and nonsense and total waste of taxpayer's money, it is that.

My final point touches—I hope that I shall not be ruled out of order—on the sub judice rule. A new process has occurred in our legal and quasi-legal system in this country. The matter that we are discussing is obviously not fully within the judicial ambit, but it will be when it is brought to court. The Guinness trial dragged on and on. I firmly believe that the individuals involved in it were almost ground down by the system. We have witnessed a similar process in what is happening with the Maxwell brothers. That is why I said I hoped that I would not be ruled out of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I shall not refer to that again.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Morris): Order. I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman's hopes have been dashed. Anything to do with the Maxwells is sub judice.

Mr. Field: There you go, Mr. Deputy Speaker; it just goes to show that my crystal ball is not so cloudy after all.

There is a similar situation in the Westminster case. The report was seven years in the making. No one who is not reliant on public funds or legally aided could sustain that, never mind the nervous energy and tension that such things create and the constant pillorying by the press. Look at what my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West has put up with from the press week after week and what it has cost him, and we then hear that Members of Parliament are all supposed to be on the make. It is appalling. If there were any sense of decency left in the media, they would start to blow the whistle at that point, because seven years of such a process is a form of torture that no citizen of this country, whether they be the heiress or the check-out lady, should have to endure.

As the Parliament which represents the people and defends their rights, we must ensure that those matters are dealt with far more swiftly and reasonably in future.

9.9 pm

Ms Margaret Hodge (Barking): I, too, will be swift. I know that other colleagues wish to speak.

In preparing last night for the debate, I referred to the words that I thought would be used most. The first was gerrymander. Gerrymandering was a word that came about in 1812 in Massachusetts, when Elbridge Gerry redrew the boundaries in that area to look like a salamander, hence gerrymander. There was party political advantage for his party. Secondly came Tammany hall, which has not been referred to as often as I expected. The term arrived a little later than gerrymandering, in the 1870s. It was a reference to the headquarters of the Democratic party in New York city, which had become a rather corrupt and powerful influence on that city. Ironically, Tammany, for the interest of right hon. and hon. Members, stems from societies that sprang up at the time of the American revolution as patriotic anti-British organisations. St. Tammany became the patron of the sons of liberty clubs.

Dame Shirley Porter can claim a unique achievement. She has managed to bring together gerrymandering and Tammany hall. She has in so doing probably created a new word for the political lexicon, which is portmander. I wonder what a political lexicographer would make of that departure in public administration. Will it be said that to portmander is a verb pertaining to the movement of electors, using taxpayers' money to influence the outcome of elections, frequently done without regard to the public health implications of a planned move—for example, into unsafe housing—and acting in pursuit of such advantage for a political party in a manner that is recklessly indifferent as to whether it is right or wrong?

We have heard much tonight about the procedure that has been used to find members and officers of Westminster city council guilty. I agree that the procedure needs reform. I look forward to the Government—or to us, the Labour party, when we come into government—reforming the procedure. To pretend, however, that the procedure has not been fair and has not ended in a finding is at best naive and at worst rather obscurantist with the truth.

The procedure is semi-judicial. We know that many Queen's counsel and a great deal of money have been involved in implementing it over a long period. Tony Child, the Audit Commission's solicitor—I am not greatly fond of the man, given the trouble that he has caused many of us in local government over the years—is an expert lawyer. He advised the auditor in the Westminster case throughout the proceedings.

It is worth referring to the summary of the report, because much nonsense has been said about there not being a guilty finding. There is such a finding. One passage reads:

"My view is that the Council was engaged in gerrymandering, which I have found is a disgraceful and improper purpose and not a purpose for which a local authority may act."

Later, the report states:

"I have at all times borne in mind the grave consequences for any individual of a finding of wilful misconduct, and such a finding should only be made on the most cogent evidence. I have adopted the approach endorsed by Lord Justice Lawton in the Court of Appeal."

Lord Justice Lawton said:

"It should take a lot of evidence to tip the balance in favour of a positive finding because the accusation is serious and the consequences of such a finding are grave."

I believe that Mr. Magill has acted with absolute diligence and total meticulousness in a semi-judicial manner. He conducted 135 interviews. The hearing lasted 32 days. His final report—I have read only the summary—covers 2,000 pages. He had information comprising 10,000 pages. It is absurd for Conservative Members to suggest that it is anything but a proper finding.

It is worrying that Conservative Members will not accept the finding. Their attitude adds to the indictment that what is happening among the Tories in Westminster city council is in too many ways uncomfortably like what is happening among the Tories in the Palace of Westminster. Both are no longer able to distinguish between the public interest, the national interest and the Tory interest. For both, the end truly justifies the means—any means—and if it helps to keep the Tories in power, it must be right.

As time is short, I should like to make two or three points that have not been mentioned. I condemn the council members involved. Dame Shirley Porter acted disgracefully throughout. She demonstrated her own guilt in an article in *The Independent* last Friday, in which she claimed to be completely innocent. She wrote:

"Naturally, Labour hated our plans. They feared it would encourage former Labour voters to support the Tories."

In saying that, she gave the game away. She was pursuing a policy to ensure that she could gerrymander that borough and retain it for the Conservatives. If she was so convinced of her innocence, why did she cancel appointments? Why did she not exercise the right to give evidence in public? Why did she shred evidence and why did the district auditor have to employ agents to find people to interview? Why did they have to look for evidence in the basement of Westminster city hall? Why did she not provide the documents on which the policy was based?

One of the most disgraceful aspects of the whole affair is the role of the officers of Westminster city council. We have to consider why such a scandal could have occurred. Had information been made freely available to all members of the council, it would not have happened and we would not be talking about the biggest scandal of political corruption for almost 30 years—since the Poulson affair.

I find it particularly disgraceful that the director of housing, whom the district auditor has found guilty of misconduct, is still employed by Westminster council in a different job. We have to consider carefully the role of officers. They have a duty to ensure that all members of the council act in the public interest and that there is no illegality.

I am extremely concerned about the implications that others outside Westminster council in the political parties knew what was happening. Let me quote briefly from a letter to the Prime Minister. I believe that the scandal and corruption probably went higher and further than Westminster, as that would explain the reluctance among Conservative Members to discuss the matter. The note to the Prime Minister from Shirley Porter on 19 December 1986 said:

"We in Westminster are trying to gentrify the City. We must protect our electoral position which is being seriously eroded by the number of homeless that we have been forced to house . . . Both I and my Chairman of Housing Committee have constantly lobbied successive Secretaries of State with very little result. I feel that the problem is so serious you should look at it yourself . . . I am afraid that unless something can be done, it will be very difficult to keep Westminster Conservative!"

Of course, politics plays a part in local government. On the whole, if local councillors get their policies right, they are re-elected. The district auditor accepts that in his report. What went wrong in Westminster was that the political advantage was not a by-product of the policies; it was their primary purpose. Unless Conservative Members understand and address that point, we shall have bad democracy.

We owe the objectors an enormous debt, and the speech by the hon. Member for Dover (Mr. Shaw) was outrageous. If the objectors had not pursued the case with such diligence, it would not have been thrown into the open, and we would not have the evidence that is now before us and from which we should learn.

We hear much from Conservative Members about the victims of crime. In this case, the victims were the homeless, who were either put into asbestos-ridden flats or came to places such as Barking courtesy of the Peabody housing trust. Barking is an hour's journey from Westminster. Those people were miles from their roots, their children's schools and their jobs and they became a financial burden on my local council in terms of social services.

The Conservatives have got their politics wrong. If they wanted a proper debate allowing understanding of the issues at stake, it would not drag on. By refusing to comment now, they are allowing this ghastly political corruption to drag on, and failing—as representatives of a nation, and as a democracy—to learn the real lessons of a dreadful experience.

9.19 pm

Ms Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): I share the sense of nauseated disgust described by my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice). I also endorse everything that was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Ms Hodge). I have little doubt that the corruption inherent in the scandal goes much higher

[Ms Glenda Jackson]

than Dame Shirley Porter and members of Westminster council. Despite protestations to the contrary by Conservative Members, this must be one of the most shameful performances from a party that is undoubtedly degenerate in supporting those whom it regards as rich and powerful while neglecting those for whom it should speak in the House—the weak and vulnerable.

We have heard much about millions of pounds. We have heard weasel words from Conservative Members. We have observed the Secretary of State attempting to walk a fine line, refusing either to condemn or to support the guilty Westminster council. The voices that we have heard remarkably little of are those of some of the victims to whom my hon. Friend the Member for Barking referred. We all know what started this gross scandal. According to Dame Shirley Porter, it was "building stable communities" or BSC. A more appropriate translation of that acronym would be "bovine spongiform conservatism", given the inordinate damage that such diseased policies have created.

Let me refer to a family in my constituency. The father was a Westminster resident for 16 years; for six years, he, his wife and their two children were tenants of a flat in Westminster. One day, out of the blue, they received a letter from the council enclosing a glossy brochure and asking whether they would like to move to an estate in Staines where there would be a garden and a better quality of life. I understand that the development had been financed partly by Westminster council under the business expansion scheme.

The family went to see the property. They had to make a decision in three days, and they duly moved to the estate. Under the same scheme, more and more families from Westminster moved to it. There were many children, and a large proportion were young teenagers. The estate was entirely inappropriate for young men, as there was virtually nothing for them to do there. It was a comparatively restricted area; there was nowhere for the children to play without causing huge disturbance to the other residents. To cut a fairly long story short, my constituents suffered severe harassment, to such an extent that they had to leave the estate. The wife, who is dark of hair and skin, was subjected to racial harassment, and her children were subjected to verbal abuse.

Having moved away from the estate, my constituents re-presented themselves to Westminster council, which they deemed to be their local authority and to be responsible for rehousing them. Westminster sent them back to Staines, and the same pattern was repeated yet again. By that time, my constituents were unable to live together: the father was living with his mother, and his wife and the children with friends. The marriage has now broken up. The mother and her two children are in a hostel in my constituency, having been placed there by Westminster council. There have been endless hearings and applications to Westminster council, which categorically refuses to take my constituents back although its pressure forced them to move from a home in which they had been happy, contented and a family.

That is the one real scandal—or one tiny part of that real scandal: the destruction of human lives, and the break-up of a family. The two young children are suffering; the daughter is suffering especially severely, because of the break-up of her family and the fact that they have no secure home. I have letters from teachers in her school saying that, despite the move to Staines, when the children returned to the school that they had known since nursery age they readapted and were absorbed easily and speedily. That is no longer the case.

It behoves the House to realise that Westminster council's practices and its gerrymandering, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Barking, for clear political advantage and with no regard whatever for taxpayers or for individuals or their families, were a scandal and a disgrace. Even more disgraceful is the way in which Conservative Members have, in a way, endorsed Westminster council's activities. The speech by the Secretary of State for the Environment, who has twice refused to condemn the council, was scandalous, but his inability to speak for the people of this country pales into insignificance compared with the speech by the Prime Minister more than a week ago on this issue.

This is the House of Commons, and we are sent here to represent people whose basic interests are to live in peace and quiet in a home that they can call their own and in security with their children. Conservative Members significantly failed to speak for those people in a debate about what is surely one of the most outrageous and corrupt scandals in local government that the city of London has had to bear for generations. That is an utter disgrace, and I sincerely hope not only that the people of London will remember what failed to emanate from Conservative Benches, but that every voter in the country will remember it.

9.26 pm

Mr. Ken Livingstone (Brent, East): I thank those hon. Members who have helped me to get a couple of minutes to speak. I used to be the Greater London council member for Westminster, North and I had many contacts with Dame Shirley Porter. She is the only person I have ever met in whom I can think of not a single redeeming feature. It is inconceivable that someone can amass such vast personal wealth and still have a chip on her shoulder. I found her one of the most remarkably stupid people I have ever come across in public life.

Why do we have this great scandal? It is because, as the GLC was drawing to its end, those of us in Westminster Labour party looked at the electoral map and saw that in a normal year, which is what 1986 was likely to be, if not a good year, Labour could win 27 of the 60 seats. We decided to concentrate on three Conservative wards, which in a normal year we would never have a chance of winning. Instead of putting our best candidates into safe Labour wards, we put them into those three Tory marginals and worked them as we had never worked them before.

We thought that by putting much effort into the election and getting people out who had not been out before in those wards, we might have just one chance of snatching a couple of them and taking control of the council. We said among ourselves, "We shall get only four years. We shall catch the Tories only once because they will canvass afterwards and rebuild those neglected wards." We failed to take the wards, but we came within a few hundred votes.

After the election, we thought, "That is it. They will never let us creep up like that on them again." In our wildest dreams, it never occurred to us that Dame Shirley

Porter would assume that the election result was an indication of some vast permanent shift to the Labour party. We had just had a damned good election campaign and it never occurred to us that she would set aside £31 million of public money, rig the entire local government system and browbeat and harass every local government officer who dared to say, "I think that this might be illegal, ma'am."

Such happenings seem inconceivable. Any local government leader with an ounce of sense—I see many such people in all parts of the Chamber—would have looked at the result and said, "They will not catch us in that way again." All that Dame Shirley Porter had to do in 1990 was to get out, do a bit of canvassing and conduct a few ward surgeries. She did not need to rig the entire system but, as I say, she is not very bright.

I do not join my colleagues in condemning the whole Tory party for supporting Dame Shirley Porter. Many Conservative Members approached me today and said, "They wanted me to speak in the debate, but I told them that I would not." A few people have been put up to bang the drum and they will live with the shame of that for the rest of their political careers. I am sure that their Labour opponents will make good use of it in the general election. By their absence tonight and by their refusal, when asked by their Whips, to justify this, many Conservative Members have shown that they are as disgusted as we are.

Corruption is not a matter simply of Westminster. We have had corrupt Labour councils and Labour figures; we have just had Robert Maxwell, for God's sake. Let no one say that all the bad apples are in one barrel, but when he realised that the game was up, at least Robert Maxwell topped himself and saved the public a trial. Dame Shirley Porter has dragged it out for 10 years and burnt the documents, and when has a district auditor ever had to do a dawn raid on the leader of the council's office? The woman is a disgrace.

My only worry is this. Dame Shirley Porter has bunked off to Israel, so I hope that we have an extradition treaty with it. If not, I know the enthusiasm of the Secretary of State for Defence. He could give the Special Air Services the job of going in and bringing her out.

9.30 pm

Ms Hilary Armstrong (North–West Durham): I was about to start by saying that this is one of the saddest debates in which I have taken part in the House, but I enjoyed the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone). In his normal way, he has reiterated what Labour Members have said many times. It is not up to us to condone or to tolerate corruption and malpractice in any council, wherever it happens. In event after event, we have sought democratically to tackle, both through our party machinery and in the House, corruption and malpractice, wherever it has arisen.

I have been horrified today to listen to Conservative Member after Conservative Member move around trying to avoid saying, "Whether this was legal or not, it was wrong." That is what we are here to do. We are not here as lawyers, even those of us who are lawyers. We are here as the public's representatives. Because of that, more is expected of us than is expected of accountants, lawyers, doctors or anyone else.

We have a trust that is so precious, it is granted only through the ballot box and occasionally. In many countries, people are fighting and dying because they are not given that trust. Hon. Members are now abusing that trust. The debate is about how public representatives maintain the trust of the folk they seek to represent.

I am happy to admit that I am not an expert in legal matters, but I have a sense of what is right and of what is wrong and of how we, as public servants, are duty bound to behave. In that regard, the House has had one of its saddest days.

Mr. Jacques Arnold *rose—[Interruption.]*

Ms Armstrong: It is all right. I am not bothered by the hon. Gentleman. He can stand there all night.

We are sent here to fulfil that trust, and we have shown that some people have taken that trust and abused it dreadfully. As I say, it is a question not of what is legally right or wrong, but what is right or wrong.

Mr. Arnold: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Armstrong: The hon. Gentleman has not been in the debate, and I need to respond to several hon. Members who have.

I do not include the right hon. Member for City of London and Westminster, South (Mr. Brooke) in that criticism. He was trying hard to say that the report contained things that he was uncomfortable with and that he did not like. I understand his difficult position, but he was prepared at least not to exonerate all the things in the report.

The district auditor's report does find that Tory councillors on Westminster council were responsible for using £31.6 million-worth of taxpayers' money for party political gain. The report states quite clearly that councillors deliberately set about a course of action that not only wasted public money, but denied desperate homeless families permanent homes while decent housing was left empty until it could be sold. All that was done for party political advantage. Despite the shredding and all the other things that were done to try to prevent the auditor from gaining access to the facts, that evidence was carefully and painfully uncovered, and has been clearly outlined by several of my hon. Friends.

I think that today will go down in the House's history. Hon. Members have refused to face up to the problems in the report, and have questioned the legality of the process. The Opposition are bound to have a little difficulty with that, because the process does not come from us; we did not create it. It did not come from on high. It came from the Government. They worked out the process and put it into legislation. They then defended it when the Widdicombe report recommended that the process should have some semblance of appeal within it. As I said earlier, in their response to Widdicombe, the Government said that that would undermine the authority of the auditor.

Today we have heard Conservative Members—not all of them—seeking to undermine the authority of the auditor. That is sad, because it is our job to ensure that the integrity of people such as auditors is not undermined, and that they are trusted. We have asked them to work on our behalf. We have given them the job and outlined the process. It is our duty to trust them to get on with that job. The auditor has cleared that with the Audit Commission, made incredible attempts to ensure that natural justice was followed, and bent over backwards to ensure that justice in its smallest degree was offered to those involved in the report.

[Ms Armstrong]

It is strange that some hon. Members say that the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South–West (Mr. Legg) has been exonerated by the report. I have read what the final report says about the hon. Gentleman. If that is exoneration, I would hate to see what condemnation and wrongdoing would look like. I would not want any of that written about me and the way I have conducted my public affairs.

I am quite happy to concede that the hon. Gentleman has been taken off the surcharge list, but that does not mean that it is not clear in the report that he did things that he should not have done and that he was let off because he did not understand that it was his duty to inform others about what was happening. I do not think that that is exoneration. It is not exoneration in the language and values that I understand. It is surprising and disappointing that the hon. Gentleman is not here. I should have thought that he would want to defend himself before the House, but apparently he is not able to do that.

The hon. Member for Dover (Mr. Shaw) is no longer in the Chamber, and I am not surprised. I came across the hon. Gentleman on many occasions when I was Parliamentary Private Secretary to the right hon. and learned John Smith. At that time, I thought that he was the one person in the House who was prepared to say anything knowing that he could not back it up. He was prepared to see the worst in anybody and to say the worst about anybody. He was always prepared to find the worst in anybody. *[Interruption.]* I am trying to deal with the facts and the hon. Member for Dover's smears. He smeared and libelled people under the guise of privilege. We were lectured by the Secretary of State for the Environment about privilege, but then we heard the most disgraceful abuse of it.

The hon. Member for Dover smeared the name of Peter Bradley. He told us that he had done all the research himself, yet, strangely, it all coincided exactly with the smears levelled by Lady Porter's henchmen in *The Times*. Peter Bradley was mentioned in an article in *The Times* in January 1995 written by Andrew Pierce, in which allegations were made about gerrymandering in Camden and Peter Bradley's so-called involvement.

It is strange that the hon. Member for Dover failed to remember and tell the House that an apology and a retraction were printed in *The Times*, and that all the expenses of my friend, who I think will be the Member for The Wrekin one day, were reimbursed by the paper, which accepted that all the allegations were untrue.

Lady Porter's henchmen tried again. They went to the Director of Public Prosecutions saying that Mr. Bradley had been involved in corruption with regard to Waitrose. The fraud squad told Lady Porter and those who had levelled accusations that it was outraged by the obvious smear, there was no case to argue, and would they please not repeat the accusations elsewhere.

I invite the hon. Member for Dover, who, as I have said, is not here—he really understands the courtesies of the House—to say such things outside the House. If he does, Peter Bradley will more easily be able to pay for his election campaign. That would be putting the hon. Member for Dover to good use.

Many things need to be said in this winding-up speech, but I do not have time. I wanted to ensure that my hon. Friends were able to speak. I find it very strange that Conservative Members have sought to undermine the role of the district auditor, and not tried to uphold the auditor's words. They have also sought deliberately to misunderstand the legal process. Of course a member has the right to appeal; anyone has the right to appeal—if they have the money—against any judgment that is made of them at any stage in our legal process, whether through audit or in the courts.

It seems that it does not matter what happens in Westminster, no matter how low the council sinks—we do not hear a word of condemnation from Tory Members of Parliament. It is little wonder that politicians have sunk so low in the public's esteem. The failure to put public duty before party interest undermines not only the standing of the Conservative party but politicians in general. I resent that, and I hope that the Minister puts another gloss on matters.

We are waiting for the Government to express some sorrow for the victims of the scandal in Westminster. That is what I cannot understand. Yes, they may want to defend their friends, but surely they recognise that, when wrong has been done, whoever has done it, we in the House ought to express some feeling for those who have suffered because of it.

We have had a remarkable debate, but a sad one. The Secretary of State ran away from the issues and tried to blame other people. It is never an answer to try to blame other people for one's own sins, or to say that one wrong can be outdone by another. No one here has sought to defend wrongdoing in any council—*[Interruption.]* I am being asked who the Secretary of State has blamed. In the past week, he has blamed the Labour party and the press—[HON. MEMBERS: "No."] Oh yes, he has. In his statement last week, he blamed the Labour party and said that it was scandalous of us to raise such matters.

Mr. Gummer: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Armstrong: No, I will not.

Mr. Gummer: The hon. Lady may remember that I have blamed nobody. I have merely said that decent people wait for the due process of law before they condemn. I always hoped that the hon. Lady would be a decent person, but this evening she has shown herself unable to do that.

Ms Armstrong: I am delighted that I gave way—because decent people recognise wrongdoing and say, "We shall not tolerate it; we are going to deal with it."

Whatever the rights and wrongs of the individuals in the case before us, the council and its policy were wrong. Whether that policy was legal or not, it was wrong. Anyone who has read the Magill report cannot help being disturbed by it. I know that the right hon. Member for City of London and Westminster, South was disturbed by it; indeed, we all were. I even think that the Minister who is about to reply was disturbed by it.

This is the time for the House to say, enough is enough. It is in all our interests to clean up the Government and to recognise the responsibilities of public representatives. Perhaps the Tory party should meditate on the words of a former Conservative Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli:

"All power is a trust; that we are accountable for its exercise; from the people and for the people all springs and all must exist."

I hope that the Tory party will return to that sentiment, and that we shall all be able to hold our heads high because we know that we are determined to insist on the utmost probity. But I do not believe that the Tories are capable of that—and if they are not, they must go.

9.46 pm

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Urban Regeneration (Mr. David Curry): I agree with the quotation that the hon. Member for North–West Durham (Ms Armstrong) used, about all power being a trust—but it is a trust that must be exercised indiscriminately. It is irrelevant whether we like people or not, and whether they are on our side or on somebody else's side. It is irrelevant by what process they have arrived at their positions. What matters is that their rights should be defended without favour and without colour.

When the hon. Lady says that we have a trust by virtue of having been elected via the ballot box—in other words, that we have obtained our jobs by a unique method—I agree with her. But equally, it is part of our trust to ensure that, when people stand charged with serious misconduct, they have the right to defend themselves as far as the law will permit.

When people are proved wrong beyond reasonable doubt—those are the terms in which the verdict of a court is expressed—they are condemned, and pay the price. So I agree with the hon. Lady that, when wrong is done and proven beyond reverse, it should be condemned, and I would be the first to condemn it.

I wish to make one thing clear to the hon. Lady, because I do not want her to suffer from any misunderstanding. We may well have arguments about parts of the subject before us, but I want to define carefully where they lie, and also where there is no argument.

My right hon. Friend and I have no argument about the role of the auditor. The auditor was acting according to statute accepted by the House—and, as a matter of record, introduced by the Government. I want to make it absolutely clear that I do not impugn the auditor's integrity or the auditor's method.

I do not impugn the Audit Commission—to which the auditor is in a sense responsible, because appointments are made by it. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have done our best to ensure that the Audit Commission is reinforced by the quality of the people who serve it, and in the range of activities that it can perform.

I will not accept an accusation that I want to level charges against the auditor, against him personally or in respect of his function. I should also like to make it clear that I do not do so in relation to the process, of which I am conscious there have been criticisms. We know that there are criticisms, because we have heard them. I do not believe that it is right, in the course of this debate and this investigation, that we should bring into the discussion the question of the procedures. Such a discussion would not be right, and I do not intend to bring it into dispute between us.

What is clear is that six people have been named in the auditor's report. The auditor has upheld the objection to the accounts in relation to those six people. The same section of the statute under which the auditor has issued his certificates provides for appeal to anyone aggrieved by the decision. That provision is available to anyone who is aggrieved, whether they are aggrieved about charges levelled against them or about the fact that the auditor may not have pursued some of the charges that were made. That provision is laid down clearly in the statute.

Notice of appeal has been lodged. It is therefore apparent that further legal process will take place. It is self-evident that that legal process could endorse the auditor's conclusions in their entirety—that is one possible outcome—in which case the councillors and the officials will stand condemned. They will merit that condemnation, and they will receive it from the Government, as they will from all the others who will no doubt level it.

It is equally self-evident that the court could disagree with the auditor, because there are exceedingly complex issues of interpretation of the law and of interpretation of motive at stake. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I are not prepared to judge that outcome.

In a debate that has ranged from, occasionally, the banal to the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for City of London and Westminster, South (Mr. Brooke)—who reminded us of the gravity of the social circumstances and problems in Westminster that we must tackle and of the real nature of Westminster, which penetrates beyond College green—some very curious arguments have been levelled. I have already stated that I do not seek to impugn the auditor, and I place that very clearly on the record.

One curious argument that has been made is that there is some moral variety in this matter, and that it is all right for one to act in some ways if it is done publicly. So, if one does something that is wrong but it is done openly, that misgovernment al fresco is all right; but if one does something else, it is absolutely wrong.

I again agree with the hon. Member for North–West Durham—which is rather embarrassing for both of us, because there are a great many issues on which we agree—that, when we seek to get a system of honest, fair local government that is run on a basis of probity, everyone is part of the democratic process. A great many hon. Members on both sides of the House have experience of local government, although I am not one of them, and they know the importance of ensuring that that first level of democracy is one in which people can endow their trust and for which they can show respect. We all know that there have been difficulties and problems, that those have to be cleaned up, and that it is in the interest of everyone who votes to do so.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Mr. Wareing) spoke about the difference between speeding and serial killing. That was hyperbole, and I at least give him credit for choosing perhaps the two greatest extremes possible. His comments seemed to introduce a note of exaggeration into the debate that does not help the genuine cause of those who are concerned about good government.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Attercliffe (Mr. Betts) made one point which I should like to clear up for him. He said that somehow all the webs came back to the Department of the Environment.

I wish to make it clear to the hon. Gentleman that he is absolutely wrong in this regard. We receive from Westminster, as we do from all authorities, annual HIP

[Mr. David Curry]

submissions which include strategy statements. They contain descriptions of housing practices. There was never any suggestion in Westminster's HIP submissions that the council used its policy on council house sales for improper purposes.

It is equally true that, since 1952, irrespective of party, Governments have given general consents for voluntary sales into owner-occupation. The consents apply to all local authorities, not just Westminster. It is for each local authority, acting reasonably and in accordance with the law, to decide whether to sell. Routine statistical returns to the Department do not reveal the details of locations or purchasers. That applies to all authorities.

Mr. Betts: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Curry: No, because the hon. Member for North–West Durham did not give way, and I have only five minutes to cover some wide ground. The hon. Gentleman will undoubtedly wish to return to the matter, and I shall be willing to do so.

The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras repeated his frequently made charge that we rig the system in favour of Westminster. If what I am about to describe is rigging, it shows a degree of incompetence on my part which I repudiate. In every year since 1991-92, the changes in SSA per head for Westminster have been less favourable than for the average of London authorities. If that is rigging, it is an extremely idiosyncratic form of it. The fact of the matter is that the SSA for Westminster increased by 19.5 per cent. in 1991-92, but the inner London average was 22.6 per cent. In every year up to the most recent year, exactly the same phenomenon is repeated.

Under the damped need assessments—the calculation used by the last Labour Government—Westminster did a great deal better than it has done under the Conservative Government. So that again is a curious form of rigging. I do not wish to accuse the Opposition of rigging in favour of Westminster, because that really would be incompetence on their part, but the figures show that the pound-per-head need assessment for Westminster when the Labour Government were in power was £487, compared with £454 for Tower Hamlets, £453 for Hackney, £343 for Manchester and £327 for Liverpool.

The differential between all those authorities and Westminster is narrower now than when the system invented by the Labour Government was in operation. So if that is rigging, it is a curious form of it. It would have been a curious thing for a Conservative Government to do, but it was done not by them but by the Labour party. The Labour party's system shows that, even when Labour intends to target, it cannot manage it.

If the system is so wicked, one wants to know what the Opposition would do about it. The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras speculates. He says that perhaps a Labour Government will change to a grants system. When he talks to Labour party conferences, he makes it up as he goes along. The hon. Member for North–West Durham prevaricates. Every article that she writes about the new framework for Labour consists of about 700 words of strictly nothing. It is written in elegant prose, but it is devoid of content.

The hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras goes around the country telling councils how much they would get if they received the same level of grant as Westminster. What he omits to say—this is the important point—is that, if we dished out grants per capita, we would have the most unjust, unfair, anti-social and perverse system of grant distribution that any Government could deliver. Unless grants follow need and deprivation, and unless they are designed to enable councils to tackle the real problems which face them, we will not have a system which can be defended.

I meet dozens of local authorities year on year. Both Labour and other local authorities come to talk to me. In the force of circumstances, it is mainly Labour authorities that come to see me. Not one says that I am rigging the system for someone else. They do not say that we have got the whole thing upside down. They say that they understand that we are trying to run a system that distributes grant according to need. They want changes because they want a system that benefits them rather than other councils. There is not a single council that does not come along with objective ideas that just happen to benefit the particular requirements of that council. That is all part of the game, and I accept that.

What I will not accept from the hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras is the idea that I sit thinking of how I can rig the system for one council or another. I do not do it; I have never done it; I will not do it. If I tried to do it, it would become so obviously transparent that every council that came to my office would start with that accusation. Not one council does. The hon. Gentleman is unique in his obsession.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 267, Noes 288.

Division No. 127] **[21.59 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene
Ainger, Nick
Allen, Graham
Alton, David
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Ms Janet *(Ros'dale)*
Armstrong, Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Banks, Tony *(Newham NW)*
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Beckett, Rt Hon Margaret
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Betts, Clive
Blunkett, David
Boateng, Paul
Bradley, Keith
Bray, Dr Jeremy
Brown, Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, N *(N'c'tle upon Tyne E)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burden, Richard
Byers, Stephen
Cabom, Richard
Callaghan, Jim
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(Fife NE)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Cann, Jamie
Carlile, Alexander *(Montgomery)*
Chisholm, Malcolm
Church, Judith
Clark, Dr David *(South Shields)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tom *(Monklands W)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Mrs Ann
Coffey, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Covy SE)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John
Dafis, Cynog
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Alistair
Davies, Bryan *(Oldham C'tral)*
Davies, Chris *(L'Boro & S'worth)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*

Davies, Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham, H'dge H'l)*
Denham, John
Dewar, Donald
Dixon, Don
Dobson, Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eastham, Ken
Etherington, Bill
Evans, John *(St Helens N)*
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fatchett, Derek
Faulds, Andrew
Fisher, Mark
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foulkes, George
Fraser, John
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Garrett, John
George, Bruce
Gerrard, Neil
Gilbert, Rt Hon Dr John
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mildred
Graham, Thomas
Grant, Bernie *(Tottenham)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike
Hanson, David
Hardy, Peter
Harman, Ms Harriet
Harvey, Nick
Hattersley, Rt Hon Roy
Henderson, Doug
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hogg, Norman *(Cumbernauld)*
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Howarth, Alan *(Strat'rd-on-A)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley North)*
Howells, Dr Kim *(Pontypridd)*
Hoyle, Doug
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Robert *(Aberdeen N)*
Hughes, Roy *(Newport E)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark)*
Hutton, John
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Glenda *(H'stead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Sheff'ld, H)*
Jamieson, David
Janner, Greville
Jenkins, Brian *(SE Staff)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn and D'side)*
Jones, Lynne *(B'ham S O)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keen, Alan
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross,C&S)*
Kennedy, Jane *(L'pool Br'dg'n)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kirkwood, Archy
Lestor, Joan *(Eccles)*
Lewis, Terry
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Litherland, Robert
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Stretford)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loyden, Eddie
Lynne, Ms Liz
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCartney, Ian
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McKelvey, William
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
Maclennan, Robert
McMaster, Gordon
McNamara, Kevin
MacShane, Denis
McWilliam, John
Madden, Max
Maddock, Diana
Mandelson, Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester, S)*
Martin, Michael J *(Springburn)*
Maxton, John
Meacher, Michael
Meale, Alan
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffield Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Rhodri
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Alfred *(Wy'nshawe)*
Morris, Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mowlam, Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Paul
Oakes, Rt Hon Gordon
O'Brien, Mike *(N W'kshire)*
O'Brien, William *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
Orme, Rt Hon Stanley
Parry, Robert
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pike, Peter L
Pope, Greg
Powell, Ray *(Ogmore)*
Prentice, Bridget *(Lew'm E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Radice, Giles
Randall, Stuart
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Dr John
Rendel, David
Robertson, George *(Hamilton)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Co'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Salmond, Alex
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shore, Rt Hon Peter
Simpson, Alan
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Chris *(Is'ton S & F'sbury)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spearing, Nigel
Spellar, John
Squire, Rachel *(Dunfermline W)*
Steel Rt Hon Sir David
Steinberg, Gerry
Stott, Roger
Strang, Dr. Gavin
Straw, Jack
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thompson, Jack *(Wansbeck)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Walker, Rt Hon Sir Harold
Wallace, James
Wareing, Robert N
Watson, Mike
Welsh, Andrew
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Sw'n W)*
Williams, Alan W *(Carmarthen)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Worthington, Tony
Wray, Jimmy
Wright, Dr Tony
Young, David *(Bolton SE)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Eric Martlew and
Mr. Jon Owen Jones.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(East Surrey)*
Aitken, Rt Hon Jonathan
Alexander, Richard
Alison, Rt Hon Michael *(Selby)*
Allason, Rupert *(Torbay)*
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, James
Arnold, Jacques *(Gravesham)*
Ashby, David
Atkins, Rt Hon Robert
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mouth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Mole V)*
Baker, Nicholas *(North Dorset)*
Baldry, Tony
Banks, Matthew *(Southport)*
Bates, Michael
Batiste, Spencer
Beggs, Roy
Bellingham, Henry
Bendall, Vivian
Beresford, Sir Paul
Biffen, Rt Hon John
Body, Sir Richard
Bonsor, Sir Nicholas
Booth, Hartley
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Eltham)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Virginia
Bowis, John
Boyson, Rt Hon Sir Rhodes
Brazier, Julian
Bright, Sir Graham
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Brown, M *(Brigg & Cl'thorpes)*
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(South Dorset)*
Budgen, Nicholas
Burns, Simon
Burt, Alistair
Butcher, John
Butler, Peter
Carlisle, John *(Luton North)*
Carlisle, Sir Kenneth *(Lincoln)*
Carrington, Matthew
Carttiss, Michael
Cash, William
Channon, Rt Hon Paul
Chapman, Sir Sydney
Churchill, Mr
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rochford)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Ru'cliff)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coe, Sebastian
Colvin, Michael
Congdon, David
Coombs, Anthony *(Wyre For'st)*
Coombs, Simon *(Swindon)*
Cope, Rt Hon Sir John
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Couchman, James
Cran, James
Currie, Mrs Edwina *(S D'by'ire)*
Curry, David *(Skipton & Ripon)*
Davies, Quentin *(Stamford)*
Davis, David *(Boothferry)*
Day, Stephen
Deva, Nirj Joseph
Devlin, Tim
Dicks, Terry
Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James
Dover, Den
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Dunn, Bob
Durant, Sir Anthony
Dykes, Hugh
Eggar, Rt Hon Tim
Elletson, Harold
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, David *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Evans, Jonathan *(Brecon)*
Evans, Nigel *(Ribble Valley)*
Evans, Roger *(Monmouth)*
Evennett, David
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fenner, Dame Peggy
Field, Barry *(Isle of Wight)*

Fishburn, Dudley
Forman, Nigel
Forsyth, Rt Hon Michael *(Stirling)*
Forsythe, Clifford *(S Antrim)*
Forth, Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam *(Woodspring)*
Fox, Rt Hon Sir Marcus *(Shipley)*
Freeman, Rt Hon Roger
French, Douglas
Fry, Sir Peter
Gale, Roger
Gallie, Phil
Gardiner, Sir George
Garnier, Edward
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Alastair
Goodson-Wickes, Dr Charles
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorst, Sir John
Grant, Sir A *(SW Cambs)*
Greenway, Harry *(Ealing N)*
Greenway, John *(Ryedale)*
Griffiths, Peter *(Portsmouth, N)*
Grylls, Sir Michael
Gummer, Rt Hon John Selwyn
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archibald
Hamilton, Neil *(Tatton)*
Hanley, Rt Hon Jeremy
Hannam, Sir John
Hargreaves, Andrew
Harris, David
Haselhurst, Sir Alan
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, Jerry
Heald, Oliver
Heath, Rt Hon Sir Edward
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hendry, Charles
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hicks, Robert
Higgins, Rt Hon Sir Terence
Hill, James *(Southampton Test)*
Horam, John
Hordern, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howell, Rt Hon David *(G'dford)*
Howell, Sir Ralph *(N Norfolk)*
Hughes, Robert G *(Harrow W)*
Hunt, Rt Hon David *(Wirral W)*
Hunt, Sir John *(Ravensbourne)*
Hunter, Andrew
Hurd, Rt Hon Douglas
Jack, Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Jessel, Toby
Johnson Smith, Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Gwilym *(Cardiff N)*
Jones, Robert B *(W Hertfdshr)*
Jopling, Rt Hon Michael
Kellett-Bowman, Dame Elaine
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom
Kirkhope, Timothy
Knapman, Roger
Knight, Mrs Angela *(Erewash)*
Knight, Rt Hon Greg *(Derby N)*
Knight, Dame Jill *(Bir'm E'st'n)*
Knox, Sir David
Kynoch, George *(Kincardine)*
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamont, Rt Hon Norman
Lang, Rt Hon Ian
Lawrence, Sir Ivan
Legg, Barry
Leigh, Edward
Lennox-Boyd, Sir Mark
Lester, Sir James *(Broxtowe)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Lord, Michael
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNair-Wilson, Sir Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maitland, Lady Olga
Malone, Gerald
Mans, Keith
Marland, Paul
Marlow, Tony
Marshall, Sir Michael *(Arundel)*
Martin, David *(Portsmouth S)*
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
Mellor, Rt Hon David
Merchant, Piers
Mills, Iain
Mitchell, Andrew *(Gedling)*
Mitchell, Sir David *(NW Hants)*
Moate, Sir Roger
Monro, Rt Hon Sir Hector
Montgomery, Sir Fergus
Needham, Rt Hon Richard
Nelson, Anthony
Neubert, Sir Michael
Newton, Rt Hon Tony
Nicholls, Patrick
Nicholson, David *(Taunton)*
Norris, Steve
Oppenheim, Phillip
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Patnick, Sir Irvine
Pattie, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Pawsey, James
Peacock, Mrs Elizabeth
Pickles, Eric
Porter, David *(Waveney)*
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Rathbone, Tim
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Renton, Rt Hon Tim
Richards, Rod
Riddick, Graham
Robathan, Andrew
Roberts, Rt Hon Sir Wyn
Robertson, Raymond *(Ab'd'n S)*
Robinson, Mark *(Somerton)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Mid Kent)*
Rumbold, Rt Hon Dame Angela
Sackville, Tom
Sainsbury, Rt Hon Sir Timothy
Scott, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
Shaw, David *(Dover)*
Shaw, Sir Giles *(Pudsey)*
Shephard, Rt Hon Gillian
Shepherd, Richard *(Aldridge)*
Skeet, Sir Trevor
Smith, Sir Dudley *(Warwick)*
Smith, Tim *(Beaconsfield)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spencer, Sir Derek
Spicer, Sir James *(W Dorset)*
Spicer, Sir Michael *(S Worcs)*
Spink, Dr Robert
Sproat, Iain
Squire, Robin *(Hornchurch)*
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stephen, Michael
Stern, Michael
Stewart, Allan
Streeter, Gary
Sumberg, David
Sweeney, Walter
Sykes, John
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy *(Southend, E)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomason, Roy
Thompson, Patrick *(Norwich N)*
Thornton, Sir Malcolm
Townend, John *(Bridlington)*
Townsend, Cyril D *(Bexl'yh'th)*
Tracey, Richard
Trend, Michael
Trotter, Neville
Twinn, Dr Ian
Vaughan, Sir Gerard
Viggers, Peter
Waldegrave, Rt Hon William
Walden, George
Walker, Bill *(N Tayside)*
Waller, Gary
Ward, John
Wardle, Charles *(Bexhill)*
Waterson, Nigel
Watts, John
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Ray
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Nicholas
Wolfson, Mark
Wood, Timothy
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Derek Conway and
Mr. Gyles Brandreth.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 30 (Questions on amendments), and agreed to.*

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House notes the publication of the Public Interest Report made by Westminster City Council's appointed auditor, Westminster City Council Audit of Accounts 1987–88 to 1994–1995; approves the action of the Government in insisting on the correct legal process; endorses the independence of the auditor; commends the Government's refusal to prejudge or condemn individuals before the conclusion of the due process of law; respects the view that parliamentary privilege is a powerful weapon for the protection of individuals and should not be used to provide cover for party political attacks; and notes that Westminster City Council provides high quality services at a value for money price.

Orders of the Day

DEER (AMENDMENT) (SCOTLAND) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 94E (Scottish Grand Committee (Bills in relation to their principle)),

That the Bill be referred to the Scottish Grand Committee.—[*Mr. Ottaway.*]

Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY DOCUMENTS

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Morris): With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to European Community documents.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 102(9) (European Standing Committees),

Welfare of Calves

That this House takes note of European Community Document Nos. 13099/95 and 4647/96 on the Welfare of Calves; and supports the Government's objective of seeking early introduction throughout the European Community of space allowances and dietary requirements which fully meet the welfare needs of calves.

Consumer Credit

That this House takes note of European Community Document No. 7774/95 and the unnumbered Explanatory Memorandum submitted by the Department of Trade and Industry on 11th January 1996, relating to consumer credit; and supports the Government's view that proposals to change the Consumer Credit Directive would require critical appraisal.—[*Mr. Ottaway.*]

Question agreed to.

Nursery Education (Grants)

[Relevant documents: the Memoranda relating to this Order and Instrument contained in the Fifteenth Report of the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments, House of Commons Paper No. 34-xv.]

10.20 pm

Mr. Peter Kilfoyle (Liverpool, Walton): I beg to move,

That the Education (Grants for Nursery Education) (England) Regulations 1996 (S.I., 1996, No. 353), dated 15th February 1996, a copy of which was laid before this House on 26th February, be revoked.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Morris): With this it will be convenient to take the following motion:

That the Education (Grants for Education Support and Training: Nursery Education) (England) Regulations 1996 (S.I.,1996, No.235), dated 15th February 1996, a copy of which was laid before this House on 26th February, be revoked.

Mr. Kilfoyle: We oppose the regulations because although they give the House the chance to debate and approve, albeit retrospectively, the financing of the pilot schemes, the Nursery Education and Grant-Maintained Schools Bill affords no opportunity to the House for a similar debate on the main scheme in the light of the lessons that we hope will be learnt from the pilot schemes. It is to be noted that the first pilot scheme is now known as phase 1. Full implementation will be known as phase 2. I do not suggest that the Government have any intention other than to ram the scheme home regardless of any evaluation and regardless, too, of the problems that are already coming to light. Evaluation will be partial, conducted by, or for, the Department for Education and Employment internally.

The statutory instruments offer an opportunity to debate the finance of the pilot schemes. They should be opposed, however, because they determine the financial underpinning for phase 1, which leads automatically to national implementation without proper parliamentary consideration subsequent to comprehensive and public scrutiny.

The statutory instruments offer far more detail than the Bill. The Bill merely allows for grants to be made under arrangements to local education authorities, social services authorities and prescribed private providers. The SIs detail payments for maintenance, assistance and otherwise; for education purposes and for rate grant of 100 per cent. They provide for the condition, manner and time of payments; arrangements for adjusting over and underpayments; provision of administration costs, and requirement for an auditor's statement. No similar provisions will be made for national implementation. These will be covered by the all-embracing arrangements, so Parliament's ability properly to invigilate the spending of public money will be severely circumscribed.

It would be helpful to the House, even in the context of a limited debate, to know why Statutory Instrument No. 235 is more detailed than No. 353. Surely both SIs should ensure that the maximum amount of information is put before the House to ensure proper scrutiny of the proposals. Perhaps the Government are already embarrassed by the shortcomings of the pilot schemes.

The Secretary of State said on 6 July 1995 that she wished to select areas that were representative of the country as a whole. That has not happened. The right

[Mr. Kilfoyle]

hon. Lady has ended up with four authorities rather than 12 to act as pilots. And what has been their experience? The parental take-up, as predicted, has been incomplete. Nearly 3,000 of the 16,200 eligible parents failed to return their voucher application forms. That is, even to someone of a simple mind, nearly 20 per cent. of the total. Within the areas concerned there have been large variations in the actual vouchers being brought into the nursery institution.

Confusion reigns. Parents cannot understand why they should be involved in a Government-inspired paper chase. Of course, those who will take up the vouchers are those in the private sector already. However, those in most need are most likely to miss out because of the bureaucratic nightmare. Thankfully, in London, where three out of the four pilots are operating, local education authorities recognise that it is not a viable option to admit only those with vouchers. The problem is exacerbated by the transient population, language difficulties and boundary considerations.

There has been no real change in admissions in the London boroughs that are operating the pilot scheme. Sensibly, schools are being paid in advance, with or without the relevant vouchers. It can hardly be said, therefore, that the money is following the voucher, contrary to what the Government have consistently argued.

Let us consider the much-vaunted provision of new places. In Norfolk, the chair of the education committee estimates a shortfall of 2,000 places. The vouchers will have little or no effect in Wandsworth, where almost all three and four-year-olds had places in nursery or reception classes. Westminster was already planning some expansion in partnership with the voluntary and private sectors. Kensington and Chelsea plans a little expansion, including partnerships, but faces space constraints.

Moreover, there is some evidence that parents are switching from private nurseries to schools in order to secure a place in a favoured local primary school. Ominously, it is now being alleged that employers are withdrawing subsidies for workplace nurseries as the voucher scheme is introduced.

What are the extra costs of making the pilot work? On the basis of written answers to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett) on 29 April and my hon. Friend the Member for Newham, South (Mr. Spearing) on 24 April, I have computed that the initial subsidy allowed for propaganda purposes was £46.30 per child. The Minister admitted that the figure then shot up to £62.90 per child. Information garnered from parliamentary answers produced a total of £81.20 per eligible child, including the extra sweeteners in grant aid. When one considers the failure to participate of one fifth of those eligible for the scheme, the extra cost of the pilot scheme has now reached nearly £98 for every voucher-using child. That represents an add-on of almost 9 per cent. to the cost of the vouchers without providing extra places or delivering the quality that everyone outside the Government demands.

Those difficulties portend far greater problems. That is why we have consistently argued that there must be a full and proper evaluation of the pilot scheme before an unequivocal commitment is made to extending the scheme nationally.

I should like to digress a moment to flag up to the Minister that concerns have been expressed to me about the role of Capita, the company handling the vouchers. Allegedly, that company is also involved in other activities in certain boroughs. Does the Minister agree that the fact that the company is also dealing with council tax collection on behalf of a local authority might lead to a conflict of interest? [HON. MEMBERS: "Why?"] I leave the House to draw its own conclusions on that. I am sure that such an organisation will have a database that can be cross-referenced and that might not be in the interests of people living in those particular boroughs.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Blackpool, South): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Kilfoyle: I am sorry, but time is limited.

At present, Capita is dealing only with the pilot schemes. However, on 13 May, the *Western Mail* ran an advertisement inviting contractors to tender for the second phase of the scheme. Although Capita apparently has failed to provide sufficient bilingual advice, the Government are talking about extending the scheme throughout the country. The advertisement makes allowances by stating:

"In Wales, vouchers will be in English and Welsh, and there will be a bilingual helpline. In Scotland there will also be a Gaelic helpline."

The pilot scheme has revealed the failure of those most in need to find out about the voucher scheme simply because provision has not been made for the multitude of languages, particularly in some London boroughs. I wonder what will happen in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), who tells me that more than 150 languages are spoken there. How will those people will able to gain access to nursery education?

During the debate on the Gracious Speech on 21 November, the hon. Member for Crosby (Sir M. Thornton), who chairs the Select Committee on Education and Employment, said:

"this is essentially a pilot to see whether the scheme can work, whether it can provide what we all want: an extension of nursery education. I ask her"—

the Secretary of State, that is—

"to look at it with an open mind; if it does not work, she should have the courage to say so and that it should not be extended."—[*Official Report*, 21 November 1996; Vol. 267, c. 487-88.]

Similarly, on Third Reading of the Nursery Education and Grant-Maintained Schools Bill, the hon. Members for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Forman) and for Bury, South (Mr. Sumberg) sought assurances that the Government would learn from the pilot scheme before pushing ahead with national implementation. What price those assurances now?

Opposition Members have consistently sought several things. We have pressed for decent buildings for nursery education. In the light of today's announcement about security arrangements—which was welcomed by Opposition Members, including my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition—may I ask the Minister whether those arrangements, which will presumably apply to the 24,000-plus schools in the maintained sector, apply to the "settings", as they are euphemistically known by the Government? As the Minister knows from the

Committee stage of the Bill, the Audit Commission estimates the potential number at nearly 40,000; some of those overlap with schools, but will the security arrangements be extended to the vulnerable young children in the "settings"?

As for teacher qualifications, we have been sadly disabused of any notion that qualified teachers will be made available at every stage—at least, qualified teachers as we understand them to be. We have argued for an effective system of inspection; yet, according to supplementary information for applicants on courses for those who wish to become registered inspectors, it is possible to be an inspector of nursery schools with a national vocational qualification at level 2, or to be an inspector with no qualifications at all, as long as the Government deem the applicant to have the necessary relevant experience—whatever that may be.

A note at the bottom of the sheet of supplementary information defines the "settings", which include

"a variety of schools, nurseries and playgroups".

It seems that we are to ask unqualified people to inspect qualified professionals who are trying, in the face of great difficulties, to deliver quality nursery education.

Incidentally, those who undertake the course are invited to attend

"a three-day non-residential training and assessment course."

They ought to be grateful, because

"The training will be free of charge",

although

"applicants will be responsible for their own travel and subsistence costs."

That strikes me as a rather shoddy way in which to provide qualified and experienced inspectors to consider the interests of nursery education.

We are still no further in terms of special educational needs. As for the protection of existing provision, we are told to leave it to the market. A report by the executive director of education and libraries for the royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea clearly states that the committee is having great difficulty in making the necessary provision. Paragraph 5.1 states:

"Major expansion of nursery provision is severely limited by the lack of capital approvals and the physical constraints of some of our school buildings."

There is little or no chance of the market providing in that regard.

All those requirements add up to the delivery of nursery education of a quality appropriate to a modern society—a society that is concerned with preparing our children for a first-world nursery education system. I could say more—similar reports have come from Wandsworth and Norfolk—but I am conscious of the time. The statutory instruments offer the House the opportunity to insist that Government meet the demands of common sense before recklessly charging into a national scheme that will worsen the situation immeasurably. I ask hon. Members to vote against them, and to vote for the motion.

10.34 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Robin Squire): The hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) has given no good reason for Opposition Members to object to the regulations. They do no more than enable the Secretary of State to pay grant to providers in the state, the private and the voluntary sectors in exchange for nursery education for four-year-olds. The expansion of quality nursery education is, as I have been told many times by Opposition Members, a goal that is shared by all hon Members.

The regulations are the means by which we can implement the first phase of the nursery education voucher scheme which, as the House knows, started last month. The scheme will be extended to the rest of the United Kingdom next year. The regulations will be used in England for a maximum of one year. For phase 2, subject to parliamentary approval there will be a specific power to pay grant to providers of nursery education under the relevant legislation.

Revoking the regulations would simply delay the introduction of the scheme and, most importantly, remove the possibility of assessing how the scheme operates in phase 1. I can see no reasonable argument for doing that, and can only assume that the Opposition are running scared of the likely success of the scheme. There is no disagreement about the fact that nursery education is intrinsically good. Our intention is to give parents the power and the wherewithal to be able to choose the best place for their child. We want to bring that about as soon as possible while bearing in mind the fact that a scheme as new as this ideally needs to be examined on a small scale before full implementation. That is why we invited local education authorities to volunteer to join phase 1 from April. I am grateful to those LEAs that did so. They have helped to shape the detail of the scheme and are reaping the benefit of increased nursery places.

Mr. Patrick Thompson (Norwich, North): Norfolk county council is one of the authorities that are taking part in the voucher scheme. Any difficulties about the scheme that have been reported to me have been dealt with straightforwardly by the county council. Will the Minister confirm that the scheme in Norfolk seems to be running successfully and smoothly with minimum problems?

Mr. Squire: I am delighted to confirm what my hon Friend has said. As he may know, in terms of vouchers issued as a percentage of the estimated number of parents, the Norfolk figure is 93 per cent. At the very least that suggests that the problems that the hon Member for Walton hinted at are not universal. It comes ill from the hon Member to jibe at the fact that there were just four volunteer LEAs because his words and those of his hon Friends no doubt dissuaded many LEAs from taking part, thus denying to the parents of four-year-olds the benefits that are available this year.

Mr. Hawkins: Does the Minister share my astonishment at the sheer effrontery of the suggestion by the hon Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) that the scheme would not help much in Wandsworth because the vast majority of three and four-year-olds there already get full-time nursery education? Does the Minister agree that that is precisely because of the enlightened leadership in Wandsworth of a Conservative administration by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, Central (Sir P. Beresford) and his successors? It is astonishing that the hon Member for Walton should quote Wandsworth in arguing against the scheme.

Mr. Squire: Game, set and match to my hon Friend, not least because, as the House will remember, we are

[Mr. Squire]

regularly told that Conservative authorities have not been good at LEA provision. As my hon. Friend makes clear, Wandsworth has been doing well.

The voluntary nature of phase 1 makes it all the more surprising that Opposition Members have prayed against the regulations. The local authorities involved have agreed to the funding arrangements that we are putting in place. No other local education authority region is affected. Private and voluntary providers in the phase 1 regions which do not wish to take part in the scheme and which have not registered with the voucher company will not be affected by the regulations.

In truth, Labour Members want to obstruct the implementation of phase 1 in a startlingly cavalier fashion. It is as though they want to punish the local authorities that have taken a positive and forward-thinking step. Do Labour Members really want those local authorities not to be able to regain funding that has already been deducted for the voucher scheme? Do they really want to deny more than 16,000 four-year-olds a choice that they might not have had before?

It is a selfish stance. It is also a strange one in the light of comments by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett) that, in the event of a Labour Government, he will honour the vouchers that have been issued. What sort of promise is that in the face of tonight's action? I conclude that Labour Members want merely to make mischief and that, having lost the argument on the Nursery Education and Grant-Maintained Schools Bill, this is just a smokescreen.

The hon. Member for Walton mentioned qualified teacher status, which, again, is familiar territory for hon. Members who served on the Committee that considered the Bill. Let me underline again that the Government do not share the view that quality nursery education can be achieved only if all voucher-redeeming institutions are led by staff with qualified teacher status. Labour Members have said that they too want the private and voluntary sectors to play an important part in the expansion of good-quality nursery places. Insisting on QTS would exclude the vast majority of those providers, who are providing excellent pre-school education.

The staff leading the way and working in many of our nurseries and playgroups already have the relevant qualifications and experience to offer children a wealth of personal, social and learning skills. The new money flowing into those sectors can only improve the existing provision.

Mr. Clive Soley (Hammersmith): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Squire: I will give way, but for the last time.

Mr. Soley: It is on that issue. Many of us are worried about the quality of education in some private institutions. Is the Minister saying that only the head needs to be qualified, or is he saying nothing about the qualifications of the rest of the staff?

Mr. Squire: I refer the hon. Gentleman, who was not blessed with joining us on the Standing Committee and who obviously missed the exchanges on this, to the Audit Commission's report earlier this year, which considered the various settings. One of the report's central conclusions was that, in terms of the quality of provision, no inherent assumption could be made that one setting was invariably better than the other. Not only Labour Members, but Liberal Democrats say that they wish to encourage these providers, but their suggestions, if adopted, would deny those providers the chance to take part in the expansion of nursery education.

Let me turn to evaluation. Labour Members have regularly stated concerns about how lessons learned in phase 1 can be applied to phase 2. They have made that clear in debates in Committee, on Second Reading and during Report, but it makes no sense to block a move that will help to achieve one of their main demands. If there were no phase 1, the scheme would be implemented throughout the country without any evaluation. That is yet another example of Labour Members' inconsistency. They ask for something, it materialises and then they reject it.

I am sure that many local authorities throughout the country are anxious for phase 1 to develop so that they can see how the volunteer authorities fare. It is in everyone's interests that any necessary fine-tuning takes place before phase 2. Let me make it clear that many LEAs, regardless of political control, will not thank Labour Members for their interventions tonight.

Ms Margaret Hodge (Barking): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Squire: I have given way a lot, unlike the hon. Member for Walton, and other hon. Members want to contribute.

It is self-evident that full evaluation of the scheme will not be possible until it is fully implemented. For such evaluation to be of any constructive use, clearly, it needs to be undertaken over a longer term, but it is equally clear that we can learn some important lessons from phase 1. As I have said, those in turn will ensure that phase 2 is implemented as smoothly and as successfully as possible. In fact, the interest and co-operation shown by volunteer authorities makes this a unique and valuable opportunity because we all want the scheme to work.

The operational issues that we are looking at cover the mechanics of the issue and redemption of vouchers, the payment process and how money reaches providers and how well the voucher company handles the task. We are already learning lessons about the mechanics of issuing vouchers. Parents in the phase 1 areas have now received their first vouchers. We can review how effectively application forms are reaching parents of eligible children and how many of those parents have been contacted directly through the child benefit data base.

I am happy to report to the House that implementation is proceeding as planned. I am happy with the progress so far. Some 630 providers from the private and voluntary sectors have registered to take part in the scheme. On average, over 80 per cent. of parents in the phase 1 areas have now received their vouchers and many will have already handed them over to providers of their own choosing.

In a matter of weeks we will be in a position to know how the vouchers have been exchanged with specific providers. There are initial indications of an expansion of places in response to the voucher initiative. That is one of

the most important pieces of information. We have already made the first payment of grant to individual providers. We will be looking at how quickly the voucher triggers payment and how money reaches the provider, be it the local education authority, the Funding Agency for Schools or an individual establishment.

There are other areas for consideration which have been set out in debates during the passage of the Bill, but in the interest of other hon. Members who wish to participate, I will not itemise them now. This is in the interests of parents, local authorities, providers and the children.

It would be wrong to revoke the regulations. They serve a purely functional purpose, enabling grants to be paid to providers of nursery education to four-year-olds. They apply only to the four volunteer areas. More importantly, the first phase enables key operational aspects of the scheme to be fully tested so that phase 2 is a success. This is good news for anybody who may be anxious about the scheme and how it will impact on local authority provision. It should be welcomed rather than frustrated. I call on the House to reject the motions.

10.46 pm

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): I have always appreciated the Minister's genial speeches but I disagree with him tonight.

Young parents, head teachers, school governors, nursery school teachers and their class assistants have all lobbied me most vociferously against the scheme. I am only in my 26th year in this honourable House and I have never experienced anything like the protests I have received in my constituency. Previously, my biggest mailbag was on the sad case of the beagle dogs who were being experimented upon and being forced to smoke cigarettes. I am now being overwhelmed by letters and lengthy petitions against this scheme. I have received 5,000 signatures of young parents in my constituency.

The professionals, the teachers and the young mothers at the school gate are adamant that they do not want the scheme and do not wish to see the "progress" suggested by the Minister. I have visited a dozen primary schools this year and I have held informal and formal talks and conducted several public meetings on the matter. At a public meeting in Connah's quay 60 parents decided that they wanted to debate the matter as soon as the school had closed. They left me in no doubt about their hostility, suspicion and anger over the voucher scheme. They felt that the scheme was liable to be socially divisive. They said that it might put money into the pockets of the well-off and menace the existing provision of nursery schooling.

I have here a typical petition. It is from the Dee Road infants school in my constituency and is headed:

"Petition Opposing the Proposed Changes to Nursery Education".

It says:

"We the undersigned would like to express our opposition to the proposed changes to Nursery Education in Wales. The present system is excellent and we feel the proposed changes would be detrimental to our children's education now and in the future."

I was so impressed by the case made and the passion with which it was expressed that I undertook to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

In my county, we already have a very good nursery school system. My constituents—parents, teachers and governors of the schools in question—want none of the initiative put forward by Ministers. My constituents have asked me to tell the House that, at the very least, they want Wales to be exempted from the scheme. We want a voucher-free zone. There is no call in Wales for this scheme; there is mounting hostility to it. We are saying to the Secretary of State for Wales that he can opt out; he has the powers to do so.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Rod Richards): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Jones: No, I do not have time. I hope that the Under-Secretary will catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I thank him for his correspondence.

The people of Wales want the Secretary of State for Wales to opt out. My constituents are saying to him, "If it works, do not fix it." Even at this late hour, we ask the Secretary of State to ask the Welsh Office to leave Wales alone. If the scheme has to go forward, let it be consigned to England.

I remind the House that, 24 years ago, I heard and saw Baroness Thatcher, the then Secretary of State for Education and Science, make a very good speech about nursery schools at the Dispatch Box. It was on the lines of the debate on the Nursery Education and Grant-Maintained Schools Bill. The speech was about her plans to increase nursery school places. The right hon. Lady, as she then was, wanted only £50 million a year for universal part-time nursery schooling, and only £100 million for capital expenditure. Of course, her plans were in being before the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries decided on a massive hike in oil prices.

Perhaps in some respects, Mrs. Thatcher's speech was the most important departmental speech on education of the 1970s. As I remember—I have re-read it—it was an emollient speech. It was not Thatcherite in style. It was made before she succumbed to the 1970s ideology of the late Sir Keith Joseph. However, it contained one trailer of the Thatcherite future. She said:

"There are such things as direct grant nursery schools where the capital provision is made by the parents".—[*Official Report*, 12 May 1972; Vol. 836, c. 1766.]

Was that choice sentence that was embedded in her emollient speech that day the origin of tonight's grants and regulations?

Since Mrs. Thatcher's speech 24 years ago, Britain has enjoyed about £120 billion-worth of North sea oil revenues and about £80 billion from privatisation moneys. For all but four of the 24 years since that speech the Conservatives have held power, yet the advance of nursery school provision has been wretchedly slow—*[Interruption.]* Please be quiet. Yes, once I was a schoolteacher, and two naughty girls—or rather, two naughty persons—are sitting in front of me. My hon. Friends the Members for Barking (Ms Hodge) and for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell) might have the courtesy to be silent while I am speaking, especially as they have been in the House only since 1992.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Geoffrey Lofthouse): Order. The hon. Gentleman can safely leave such matters in the hands of the headmaster.

Mr. Jones: I am glad that you have offered protection to my hon. Friends, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because they mean well.

[Mr. Jones]

Britain now has a culture of drugs, of harsh violence, of offensive graffiti, of almost universal vandalism, of widespread unemployment and of urban decay. In that context, nursery schooling is vital, and my constituents are saying to me, "In Wales, can we consign the voucher system to the dustbin of history?"

10.55 pm

Mr. James Pawsey (Rugby and Kenilworth): I greatly enjoyed the reference by the hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones) to my right hon. and noble Friend Lady Thatcher, and I am certain that she will enjoy his compliments.

If you will allow me to digress for a moment, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I shall express my thanks and appreciation for what the Minister has said about security in schools. The whole House will welcome it, as well as the fact that all the recommendations have been accepted. I was also pleased to hear the cheerful comments—at least, those about security in schools were cheerful—by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle). It is good to see some agreement on that important issue between those who sit on the two Front Benches.

This is the third time that we have sought to debate the regulations. The first time, Opposition Members did not attend for the debate. They were not here, which gives us a clear idea of the importance that they really attach to nursery education. The second time that we tried, the business changed. Now we are on our third attempt and, having listened to the hon. Member for Walton, I wonder why he bothered.

None the less, this will be a short but important debate about the Government's scheme to introduce nursery education vouchers—an initiative that will place in the hands of parents a voucher worth £1,100, which may be exchanged either for a part-time nursery place or, where one may be on offer, for a full-time reception class place.

I have no doubts about the effectiveness of the scheme; my principal concerns are about the black propaganda currently circulating, which is clearly intended to discredit vouchers. That propaganda seeks to worry and distract parents by suggesting, for example, that the voucher scheme will reduce choice, and that it may not have adequate quality—the hon. Member for Walton said that again tonight. It is also suggested that there will not be enough places for all those whose parents seek to take advantage of the scheme, or that the system is bureaucratic. The usual phrase used—again, the hon. Gentleman used it—describes it as a "paper-chase". It is alleged that the scheme will cut the primary places now on offer for three-year-olds.

All those fears are groundless, and all the concerns have been fabricated for political rather than for educational reasons. All those synthetic reasons have been advanced in an effort to secure cheap political advantage. What I have to say about Opposition Members applies to the Liberal spokesman, the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), too—I mentioned him deliberately, to wake him up, because I thought that he was dozing off. If Opposition Members had had the imagination or the courage to introduce vouchers they would now be telling us that vouchers were the best thing for parents since apple pie. But because Opposition Members do not have the wit or the imagination, they seek to denigrate a first-rate scheme that will be of positive benefit and positive advantage to all the nation's nursery children.

Mr. John Carlisle (Luton, North): I agree with my hon. Friend. The black propaganda that is being put out by the Labour party has certainly broken out in my constituency after the visit by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett), who encouraged people to march in the streets against this scheme. Perhaps my hon. Friend might reflect in his comments that the Opposition have failed to address the fact that the scheme will give many thousands of four-year-olds the chance of nursery education which they did not have before. Whatever the merits of the scheme, at least some children will be able to enjoy nursery education who were denied that provision before. That is something that the Opposition have failed to understand and that they have certainly failed to promote. I hope that my hon. Friend will promote it.

Mr. Pawsey: My hon. Friend made one of his typically telling interventions. He raised a very salient point, and I am sure that the House has noted with the utmost care what he had to say.

Contrary to the black propaganda, vouchers should not damage any existing local education authority schemes, and parents can continue to send their children to them if they so wish. Conservative Members have sought to add a greater element of choice, and the introduction of vouchers will not require LEAs to change existing admission patterns—which is quite contrary to what has been suggested by some Labour Members.

I believe that some LEAs will, however, want to maintain or perhaps slightly modify their current admission patterns, which should increase the number of admissions and increase voucher income. That will assist materially in improving the quality of what is on offer. If an LEA wished to admit an entire year group into a reception class in September, it can do so. The voucher merely triggers the flow of resources from the Department for Education and Employment to the LEA, and then to the appropriate school.

I can remember Jim Callaghan saying that a lie can be halfway round the world before truth has pulled on its boots. I mention that because it is alleged that the introduction of the voucher will destroy existing LEA provision for three-year-olds. That is simply not true. There is absolutely no reason why provision for three-year-olds should be damaged. No resources have been deducted from the LEA's standard spending assessments for provision for three-year-olds.

It is anticipated that the total amount available for nursery education vouchers will be about £750 million, much of which will be derived from recycled funds that already exist for nursery education. But—it is an important "but"—a further £165 million of new money has been found and allocated. That is a clear indication of the importance that the Government attach to nursery education.

I shall briefly, because of the lateness of the hour, return to the pilot schemes that are now up and running. More than 1,100 providers have so far registered to be part of the pilot schemes, and that figure includes about 650 applications from the private and voluntary sectors,

which is almost two thirds of the total. That number clearly shows the interest and the enthusiasm that has been displayed for this scheme. It also clearly shows that there will be more than enough places for children when the scheme goes national next April. I say that because I am again aware that the black propagandists—which I sometimes think is an alternative way of describing the Labour and the Liberal parties—have said that there will be insufficient places. Those who claim that are simply wrong and the success of the pilots underlines that point.

I wonder if I might now turn to the motion. You will notice, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that, unusually, the motion bears seven names instead of the usual six. Provision has been found for the hon. Member for Wallsend (Mr. Byers) to include his name on the motion, but the House will be surprised to see that no room has been found for the shadow Chancellor to do so. You may think that it is not simply an accidental omission. I make that point because I was interested to see in the *Daily Mail* today the comment:

"Intrigue that left Brown a bitter man".

The Sun said:

"Labour in turmoil. Showdown. Sack PR boss Mandelson for his vendetta against me, rages Brown."

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. What does that have to do with the motion? The hon. Gentleman must confine his remarks to the motion that we are debating.

Mr. Pawsey: I was merely seeking to inquire why, unusually, the shadow Chancellor's name does not appear on the motion on the Order Paper. You will see that there is a substantial list of names, but that his is an important omission. I was merely suggesting to the House the reasons why it may not be there, but I was—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. What does the *Daily Mail* report have to do with this motion?

Mr. Pawsey: I was merely commenting on certain of the statements which that esteemed paper had made. I shall return to the motion and join my hon. Friend the Minister in urging the House to reject it.

11.6 pm

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): During our discussions in Committee, I was accused of having a special relationship with the hon. Member for Rugby and Kenilworth (Mr. Pawsey). So I was delighted by some of his remarks about me and about the Liberal Democrats, which I think will remove any fears that such a relationship exists. However, I agree with the hon. Gentleman on one thing, namely, the Government's acceptance of the recommendations in respect of school safety. We were all delighted not only by the comprehensive nature of the recommendations but by the fact that the Secretary of State accepted them in their entirety.

I disagree with the hon. Member for Rugby and Kenilworth in relation to tonight's debate. He referred to black propaganda and accused those whom he said were guilty of spreading it of not having the wit or imagination to see how wonderful the scheme was. Unfortunately, in making such a remark, he criticises not only Opposition parties but all those organisations which have had any involvement with early-years education. Not one organisation involved in high-quality early-years education has not expressed reservations to one degree or another about the proposals contained in the legislation, which will be triggered by the regulations that we are considering tonight.

The "black propaganda" described by the hon. Member for Rugby and Kenilworth has been made by a large number of highly reputable organisations which join me in believing that the nursery vouchers proposals are cumbersome and bureaucratic; that they will not deliver high-quality provision; that they will not significantly expand provision; that they do nothing to help the provision for three-year-olds and could harm what provision exists for them; and that the scheme does nothing to provide additional support for children with special educational needs. In short, the scheme is a woefully underfunded gimmick which will not meet the needs of the nation.

The hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones) called for Wales not to be included in the scheme. There are equally powerful calls for it not to apply to any other part of the country.

To accept the regulations would imply support for an incredibly bureaucratic and cumbersome scheme that my party fundamentally opposes. The hon. Member for Rugby and Kenilworth tried to pretend that it was not bureaucratic and cumbersome. Let me remind him of how the scheme works in the trials and pilots. Imagine how it applies to a local education authority nursing school.

Under the management of Capita Ltd., the scheme works like this. The Child Benefit Agency sends an application form to the parent. The parent completes it and sends it back to Capita. Capita sends back a voucher. The parent gives that to the school, which gives it to the LEA, which in turn sends it back to Capita. Capita confirms receipt to the Department, which sends the money earlier removed by the Government from the LEA's budget to the LEA, which then hands it back to the school. All that from a Government pledged to the removal of red tape. It is hardly surprising that many of the parents eligible for vouchers in the trial areas did not apply for them or thought that they could use them to buy school uniforms, despite the large sums that have been spent on advertising.

It is hardly surprising that people in the pilot areas feel conned and cheated. They believed that vouchers would guarantee places for their children but there are insufficient places in the trial areas to meet demand. Many other concerns about how the trials operate have been expressed in those areas.

For example, I received a letter from a head teacher at a Norfolk nursery school that stated:

"Parents have been very confused and frustrated by the nursery voucher system."

That is hardly surprising.

In the same letter, the head teacher expresses her concern:

"There has also been a noticeable decline in relationships between providers now that they are required to compete for nursery voucher children. This will not help the children as they move from one form of provision to another, e.g. from playgroup to school. Conflict and competition between providers has a negative effect on the whole community and therefore cannot be good for children."

Mr. Patrick Thompson: The hon. Gentleman referred to Norfolk. As I said in my intervention on my

[Mr. Patrick Thompson]

hon. Friend the Minister, I have of course had one or two problems in my constituency postbag. The hon. Gentleman fails to recognise that every problem that I, as a Norfolk Member, have received has been clearly answered by the local education authority and sorted out. The level of complaints that I have received has been remarkably small considering that it is a trial period. He must not exaggerate the problems.

Mr. Foster: If the hon. Gentleman believes from his postbag and his experience as a hard-working constituency Member of Parliament that the trial can pass on happily without difficulty and be translated to full implementation nationwide, he has another think coming. One reason why some of the difficulties have been overcome in Norfolk is that significant additional sums of money and a range of bribes have been offered which will not be offered to other local education authorities for the full scheme.

I hope that I have demonstrated why we do not support the scheme. To support the regulations would be implicitly to support the scheme as a whole. For that reason, we shall certainly not vote for the regulations.

11.13 pm

Sir Malcolm Thornton (Crosby): It may be that the fears expressed by hon. Members will prove groundless—time will tell. We know that a remarkable consensus exists on nursery education, underpinned by its benefits and the absolute need to ensure the highest possible quality. Those are the givens in this debate, on which there is no disagreement either within or outside the House.

I reiterate the concern that I expressed in the debate on the Loyal Address, to which the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) referred, when I told my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that if a pilot means anything it means objective analysis of every part of the scheme's implementation in the pilot areas. It means monitoring whether the scheme is working and delivering the quality that I mentioned. I hope that the Minister will repeat the assurance given by my right hon. Friend that if the scheme does not work the Government will be prepared to consider whatever amendments need to be made before we risk full implementation throughout the country.

11.15 pm

Mr. Clive Soley (Hammersmith): Today we heard the Prime Minister commit the taxpayer to spending probably millions of pounds to deal with some of the problems found in and around our schools; yet tonight we are debating a pathetically inadequate and bureaucratic measure instead of well-funded, high-quality nursery education which would help to head off some of the problems facing our schools

If the Government had only a small fraction of a policy for the families of Britain, they would not be introducing measures that will undermine family structure. When I intervened on the Minister, he seemed to indicate that a private sector nursery could have virtually no qualified staff. Although there are many private sector establishments—such as Bringing up Baby in my constituency, which I helped to establish—which are of a good standard and use highly qualified staff, many are of poor quality. It seems that the Government are to take money from local authorities to subsidise a scheme which will not produce the standards that we want. Quality is critical.

As the Liberal spokesman said, we are asking local authorities to implement an incredibly bureaucratic system. As the Minister knows, Hammersmith and Fulham council has one of the best reputations for good quality nursery education. For the first time in six years, it is having to cut nursery education because of Government-imposed cuts on local authorities. Prior to that, the authority was protecting nursery education by making cuts elsewhere. That is no longer possible. Good nursery schools such as James Lee and Vanessa have to suffer cuts. Sometimes that may be only a fraction of a teaching post, but I remind the Minister—who represents a London constituency, if one can say that Hornchurch is in London—that the capital has the specific problem, in addition to those affecting other inner cities, of multilingual children, including many refugees, who require extra tuition. Education authorities are asked to deal with that situation because the Government allow refugees—rightly, in my view—to enter this country. Why on earth are the Government introducing a scatterbrained scheme that does not address the provision of high-quality nursery education?

The Minister answered my intervention in a way that suggested that the quality of staff training is not sufficiently high. Even the Government now recognise that poor quality education in Britain has been part of the country's economic and social problems for many years; yet they are prepared to give money to organisations that may not be up to the job. Nursery education should be high quality and use highly trained teachers, and it should be universally available. The Minister should rethink the scheme. He should not waste money on bureaucratic experiments that no one wants. Conservative parents and Labour parents agree on that. Parents want the money to be spent on achieving high-quality nursery education with well-qualified staff, whether in the public sector or in the private sector. If the Minister rethinks the scheme, he might get some support.

11.19 pm

Ms Estelle Morris (Birmingham, Yardley): The debate is important because the regulations relate to the financial arrangements for phase 1 of the nursery voucher scheme and they will become the financial provisions that will govern phase 2 of the scheme. The Minister is absolutely right: this is a last chance attempt to stop phase 1 going to phase 2 before a proper evaluation takes place. There will not be a further opportunity for hon. Members to debate whether they want a nationwide nursery voucher scheme. Despite the best efforts of the Labour party, there will be no proper scrutiny or full evaluation of phase 1 before phase 2 is imposed.

The hon. Member for Crosby (Sir M. Thornton) is Chairman of the Select Committee on Education and Employment. He must reflect on this before he casts his vote this evening. No matter what the situation in phase 1 at the end of March next year, and no matter how serious the flaws, he cannot believe that the Government have no intention of proceeding with phase 2. That is the importance of today's vote—it is a last chance, but it is a real chance, to stop an unpopular and wasteful system being imposed on the rest of the country.

Throughout the consideration of the Nursery Education and Grant-Maintained Schools Bill, the Minister failed to explain or to justify why he will not deal with the issue in a sensible and responsible way. Time after time—from the Queen's Speech in the autumn to Third Reading of the Bill in the spring—hon. Members on both sides of the House pleaded with the Minister properly to evaluate phase 1 of the scheme. The hon. Member for Crosby and his colleagues the hon. Members for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Forman) and for Bury, South (Mr. Sumberg) must be deeply disappointed that the Minister has not listened to their calls for a proper evaluation.

It is not only politicians who have urged caution: teachers, governors, parents, local authorities and nursery providers have all made a strong argument for evaluation before expansion. It is sad—it is as though the Government are trying to make up for lost time. It has taken them 17 years to learn what others have known all that time—that nursery education is vital for a child's success. The Government have spent almost two decades doing nothing, and now they will not be sensible enough to pause for thought. Late converts are welcome. The Minister must learn to listen and to listen well.

There is already ample evidence that a second thought would be wise. The hon. Member for Rugby and Kenilworth (Mr. Pawsey) talked about black propaganda—the only propaganda in this House is blue, not black. The Labour party does not talk about propaganda, it talks about the real experiences of real people in the phase 1 scheme. At the start of the phase 1 scheme, 2,000 parents have vouchers but no places, parents in Wandsworth have places but do not understand why they now need a voucher, and 20 per cent. of parents have not returned the application form.

On the evidence so far, the House would be acting irresponsibly if it did not make the Government pause and properly evaluate before going any further; to do anything else would be an abuse of public funds. The Tory record on pre-school education is one of broken promises and missed opportunities. As my hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones) said, from Margaret Thatcher in the 1970s to John Major in the 1990s, a generation of children have been denied the start that they need to their schooling because the Tories have failed to keep their word—and they are doing it again tonight. The Prime Minister's cast-iron commitment of last year is as far away today as it has ever been.

On this issue at least, the Government could keep their promises. The money that they are earmarking tonight for the nursery voucher scheme could have been earmarked for real nursery places for real children in top quality nursery schools. But instead of spending the money to keep their promises, the Government choose to give it to men who will shuffle paper. The statutory instruments that we are discussing approve £10 million to be spent on shifting 20 million pieces of paper around the system. They approve £1.1 million in publicity. An undisclosed sum will be paid to a management company, That will mean reducing places for three-year-olds. What a waste of resources and opportunity.

After two decades of failure and inaction, on this occasion the Minister owed it to parents and children to spend their money on places, not paper. It is foolhardy to implement the voucher system without proper evaluation. To approve the statutory instruments before us tonight would do exactly that. That is why the House should approve the motion to reject them.

11.25 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mrs. Cheryl Gillan): As the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Squire), said earlier, I must say that I have heard no intelligent argument from Opposition Members to convince me that the regulations that we have debated tonight should be revoked.

I was surprised at the paucity of the argument advanced by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle), which was only exceeded by his ignorance of the regulations that he seeks to block. For his information, statutory instrument No. 235 is more detailed than statutory instrument No. 353. Statutory instrument No. 235 is a regulation made under the grants for education support and training scheme, a well-known scheme for specific funding. The primary legislation underpinning those regulations requires that detail. Statutory instrument No. 353 is based on a very general grant-giving power, and the primary legislation does not require the same detail. I fail to understand why the hon. Gentleman asked that question in his opening remarks.

We had excellent interventions from my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Mr. Thompson), who showed us that the scheme is now working well in Norfolk. He was able to put the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) straight, as the hon. Gentleman obviously fails to understand the procedure for providers and parents, which is very streamlined. The hon. Gentleman gave exaggerated evidence of the problems, but I suppose that that is to be expected from the Liberal Democrats, who exaggerate at every opportunity.

The hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones), who graciously chaired our Committee proceedings on the Nursery Education and Grant-Maintained Schools Bill, seemed to be having problems coping with his constituency correspondence. He spoke of the menace of nursery education and wanted a voucher-free zone, but the message that came across was that he wanted Welsh parents to have less choice than English parents. He would not even give way to the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, North-West (Mr. Richards), who wanted to put him straight on the matter. I was surprised that the hon. Member also gave us the strong impression that he considers that women should be seen and not heard.

A first-class contribution was made to the debate by my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby and Kenilworth (Mr. Pawsey), who as usual showed great understanding of our education policies. As we sought to explain, the regulations are simply a vehicle to enable grant to be paid to providers of nursery education, and they are being used to implement the first phase of the nursery education voucher scheme. Moreover, the regulations affect only providers in four local authority areas, and on a purely voluntary basis. Revoking the regulations would penalise the very institutions that we should encourage—forward-thinking providers who want to expand the availability of nursery education. The four local authorities would not be able to regain the funding that has already been deducted for the scheme.

[Mrs. Cheryl Gillan]

We want the voucher scheme to be a success for parents and providers alike. Ultimately, children will be the main beneficiaries. We are confident that, in time, the additional demand created by the voucher scheme will lead to all four-year-olds having the chance of nursery education. Phase 1 allows us to test fully the operational arrangements that we are setting up. That process will ensure that when phase 2 is implemented it is efficient and cost-effective.

As for quality, we have imposed important safeguards to ensure that only providers of good quality education take part in phase 1. The requirement that all providers must publish information about their provision, accommodation and staff will enable parents to make an informed decision.

If the Labour party is so firmly opposed to nursery vouchers, where are its alternative proposals? At present, nursery education depends on chance—the chance that parents can afford it or that they live in an area where such education is provided. We want choice, not chance, and that is exactly what the scheme will deliver: choice to parents wherever they live.

Dog-in-the-manger politics have brought the Labour party to the Opposition Dispatch Box in a mediocre and mean-minded attempt to rob pilot authorities of the funding that has already been deducted for the voucher scheme. I ask my right hon. and hon. Friends to reject the Opposition proposals.

Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 210, Noes 236.

Division No. 128] **[11.30 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene
Ainger, Nick
Alton, David
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Ms Janet *(Ros'dale)*
Armstrong, Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Banks, Tony *(Newham NW)*
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Beckett, Rt Hon Margaret
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Betts, Clive
Blunkett, David
Boateng, Paul
Bradley, Keith
Brown, N *(N'c'tle upon Tyne E)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burden, Richard
Byers, Stephen
Callaghan, Jim
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(Fife NE)*
Cann, Jamie
Carlile, Alexander *(Montgomery)*
Chidgey, David
Church, Judith
Clark, Dr David *(South Shields)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tom *(Monklands W)*
Clelland, David
Coffey, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Covy SE)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Alistair
Davies, Bryan *(Oldham C'tral)*
Davies, Chris *(L'Boro & S'worth)*
Davies, Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham, H'dge HT)*
Denham, John
Dewar, Donald
Dixon, Don
Dobson, Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eastham, Ken
Etherington, Bill
Evans, John *(St Helens N)*
Fatchett, Derek
Fisher, Mark
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
George, Bruce
Gerrard, Neil
Gilbert, Rt Hon Dr John
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Golding, Mrs Llin
Graham, Thomas
Grant, Bernie *(Tottenham)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike
Hanson, David
Hardy, Peter
Harman, Ms Harriet
Harvey, Nick
Hattersley, Rt Hon Roy
Henderson, Doug
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hogg, Norman *(Cumbernauld)*
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Howarth, Alan *(Strat'rd-on-A)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley North)*
Hoyle, Doug
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Robert *(Aberdeen N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark)*
Hutton, John
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Glenda *(H'stead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Sheff'ld, H)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian *(SE Staff)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn and D'side)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Lynne *(B'ham S O)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Tessa
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross,C&S)*
Kennedy, Jane *(L'pool Br'dg'n)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kirkwood, Archy
Lewis, Terry
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Stretford)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loyden, Eddie
Lynne, Ms Liz
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCartney, Ian
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
McMaster, Gordon
MacShane, Denis
McWilliam, John
Madden, Max
Maddock, Diana
Mandelson, Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester, S)*
Martin, Michael J *(Springburn)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Michael
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffield Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Rhodri
Morris, Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mowlam, Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Paul
Oakes, Rt Hon Gordon
O'Brien, Mike *(N W'kshire)*
O'Brien, William *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
Parry, Robert
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pike, Peter L
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Dr John
Rendel, David
Robertson, George *(Hamilton)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Co'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Simpson, Alan
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Chris *(Is'ton S & F'sbury)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Spearing, Nigel
Spellar, John
Steel, Rt Hon Sir David
Steinberg, Gerry
Stott, Roger
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Thompson, Jack *(Wansbeck)*
Tipping, Paddy
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis
Wallace, James
Wareing, Robert N
Watson, Mike
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Alan W *(Carmarthen)*
Wilson, Brian
Worthington, Tony
Wray, Jimmy
Wright, Dr Tony

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mrs Bridget Prentice and
Mr. Malcolm Chisholm.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(East Surrey)*
Alexander, Richard
Alison, Rt Hon Michael *(Selby)*
Allason, Rupert *(Torbay)*
Amess, David
Arnold, Jacques *(Gravesham)*
Ashby, David
Atkins, Rt Hon Robert
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mouth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Nicholas *(North Dorset)*
Baldry, Tony
Banks, Matthew *(Southport)*
Bates, Michael
Batiste, Spencer
Beggs, Roy
Bellingham, Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Bonsor, Sir Nicholas
Booth, Hartley
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Eltham)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Virginia
Bowis, John
Brazier, Julian
Bright, Sir Graham
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Budgen, Nicholas
Burns, Simon
Burt, Alistair
Butcher, John
Butler, Peter
Carlisle, John *(Luton North)*
Carlisle, Sir Kenneth *(Lincoln)*
Carrington, Matthew
Cash, William
Channon, Rt Hon Paul
Chapman, Sir Sydney
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rochford)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Ru'clif)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coe, Sebastian
Colvin, Michael
Congdon, David
Conway, Derek
Coombs, Anthony *(Wyre For'st)*
Coombs, Simon *(Swindon)*
Cope, Rt Hon Sir John
Couchman, James
Cran, James
Currie, Mrs Edwina *(S D'by'ire)*
Curry, David *(Skipton & Ripon)*
Davies, Quentin *(Stamford)*
Day, Stephen
Deva, Nirj Joseph
Devlin, Tim
Dicks, Terry
Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James
Dover, Den
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Dunn, Bob
Durant, Sir Anthony
Dykes, Hugh
Eggar, Rt Hon Tim
Elletson, Harold
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, David *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Evans, Jonathan *(Brecon)*
Evans, Nigel *(Ribble Valley)*
Evans, Roger *(Monmouth)*
Evennett, David
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fenner, Dame Peggy
Field, Barry *(Isle of Wight)*
Fishburn, Dudley
Forman, Nigel
Forsyth, Rt Hon Michael *(Stirling)*
Forth, Eric
Fox, Dr Liam *(Woodspring)*
Freeman, Rt Hon Roger
French, Douglas
Gale, Roger
Gallie, Phil
Garnier, Edward
Gillan, Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Alastair
Goodson-Wickes, Dr Charles
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorst, Sir John
Greenway, Harry *(Ealing N)*
Greenway, John *(Ryedale)*
Griffiths, Peter *(Portsmouth, N)*
Grylls, Sir Michael
Gummer, Rt Hon John Selwyn
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archibald
Hamilton, Neil *(Tatton)*
Hargreaves, Andrew
Harris, David
Haselhurst, Sir Alan
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, Jerry
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hendry, Charles
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hill, James *(Southampton Test)*
Horam, John
Hordern, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howell, Rt Hon David *(G'dford)*
Hughes, Robert G *(Harrow W)*
Hunt, Rt Hon David *(Wirral W)*
Hunt, Sir John *(Ravensbourne)*
Hunter, Andrew
Hurd, Rt Hon Douglas
Jack, Michael
Jessel, Toby
Johnson Smith, Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Gwilym *(Cardiff N)*
Jones, Robert B *(W Hertfdshr)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom
Kirkhope, Timothy
Knapman, Roger
Knight, Mrs Angela *(Erewash)*
Knight, Rt Hon Greg *(Derby N)*
Knox, Sir David
Kynoch, George *(Kincardine)*
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lamont, Rt Hon Norman
Lang, Rt Hon Ian
Lawrence, Sir Ivan
Legg, Barry
Leigh, Edward
Lester, Sir James *(Broxtowe)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Lord, Michael
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNair-Wilson, Sir Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maitland, Lady Olga
Malone, Gerald
Marland, Paul
Marshall, Sir Michael *(Arundel)*
Martin, David *(Portsmouth S)*
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
Merchant, Piers
Mitchell, Andrew *(Gedling)*
Mitchell, Sir David *(NW Hants)*
Monro, Rt Hon Sir Hector
Montgomery, Sir Fergus
Needham, Rt Hon Richard
Nelson, Anthony
Neubert, Sir Michael
Newton, Rt Hon Tony
Nicholls, Patrick
Nicholson, David *(Taunton)*
Norris, Steve
Oppenheim, Phillip
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Patnick, Sir Irvine
Pawsey, James
Peacock, Mrs Elizabeth
Pickles, Eric
Porter, David *(Waveney)*
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Renton, Rt Hon Tim
Richards, Rod
Riddick, Graham
Robathan, Andrew
Roberts, Rt Hon Sir Wyn
Robertson, Raymond *(Ab'd'n S)*
Robinson, Mark *(Somerton)*
Ross, William *(E Londonderry)*
Rumbold, Rt Hon Dame Angela
Sackville, Tom
Scott, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
Shaw, David *(Dover)*
Shaw, Sir Giles *(Pudsey)*
Shephard, Rt Hon Gillian
Smith, Sir Dudley *(Warwick)*
Smith, Tim *(Beaconsfield)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spencer, Sir Derek
Spicer, Sir James *(W Dorset)*
Spicer, Sir Michael *(S Worcs)*
Spink, Dr Robert
Sproat, Iain
Squire, Robin *(Hornchurch)*
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stephen, Michael
Stewart, Allan
Sweeney, Walter
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomason, Roy
Thompson, Patrick *(Norwich N)*
Thornton, Sir Malcolm
Townend, John *(Bridlington)*
Townsend, Cyril D *(Bexl'yh'th)*
Trend, Michael
Trotter, Neville
Twinn, Dr Ian
Viggers, Peter
Waldegrave, Rt Hon William
Walden, George
Walker, Bill *(N Tayside)*
Waller, Gary
Waterson, Nigel
Watts, John
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Ray
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macc'fld)*
Wolfson, Mark
Wood, Timothy
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Gary Streeter and
Mr. Gyles Brandreth.

Question accordingly negatived. .

Reading Tuition (Primary Schools)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Wood.]*

11.42 pm

Mr. Graham Riddick (Colne Valley): I submitted this topic for debate in the light of the report by the Office for Standards in Education, published last week, about the teaching of reading in a number of inner-London primary schools. The debate also coincides with the standard attainment tests that are taking place this week in primary schools throughout the country.

My concern about some aspects of primary education do not, however, stem simply from last week's report. A number of reports in recent years have suggested that far too many pupils fail to reach educational standards appropriate to their ability and age.

Last week's report on the teaching of reading in London schools was a shocker. Eighty per cent. of seven-year-olds had reading abilities appropriate to an age below their actual age; nearly 20 per cent. of those achieved no score at all. Four out of 10 11-year-olds were found to have reading ages two or more years below their actual age. The usual excuses about social deprivation and lack of resources will not do; the report made it clear that the quality of schools' intake was not a reliable guide to pupil performance, and that similar schools scored differently.

Sadly, a growing bank of evidence suggests that the deficiencies in primary education that were exposed in last week's report are not confined to inner London. Last year, a report from the National Institute of Economic and Social Research found that the bottom 40 per cent. of 13-year-olds in English schools lagged two years behind their German equivalents, and never caught up. The author of the report, Professor Prais, was critical of the emphasis that had been increasingly placed on the child-centred, individualistic approach to schooling, in which pupils were encouraged to proceed at their own pace.

By contrast, the emphasis on the continent is on teaching the class as a whole and on ensuring that pupils advance together to a high average standard. Last year, the Basic Skills Agency published a report which stated that the 30 per cent. or so of children who had not learned to read properly by the age of 10 never recover. I understand that this week the agency will publish a report confirming that about 32 per cent. of those going to secondary schools are reading at the level of nine-year-olds.

Last year's national tests for 11-year-olds showed that 52 per cent. of pupils failed to reach national curriculum level 4 in English, the standard that is expected to be achieved by a typical pupil of that age. Additionally, nearly half the 14-year-olds failed to reach the expected standard in English and mathematics in their tests. The failure of so many of our young people to reach their full potential gives rise to massive concern for the future well-being and prosperity of this country. For young people, the lack of proper grounding in literacy and numeracy can range from inconvenient in later life to downright disastrous.

I have no doubt that many of the social problems that face this country can be partly attributed to the way in which the education system has let down many people in their early years, particularly in inner-city areas. Recently, people have asked me whether there is a problem about the teaching of reading in my constituency. I do not think there is, and from my visits I can say that I have some excellent primary schools in my constituency. I visited one such school on Friday, the Meltham Church of England junior and infants school in Holmfirth road, Meltham, which, I am pleased to say, has just received an excellent report from Ofsted.

I cannot be certain about the achievements of my local schools, because, without information, it is difficult to make comparisons and judgments. That is why I am delighted that the results of this week's tests for 11-year-olds will for the first time be made public by school and in league table form. I hope that, next year, the results of the tests for seven-year-olds will also be made public in that form. Many heads and primary school teachers are unhappy at that prospect, but information, transparency and openness are crucial in helping to drive up standards in our schools.

We need to get parents more involved in the educational process, and they can do that only if they have some meaningful information that they can use to compare local schools. The publication of the results will in itself improve standards, because schools that have not performed well, or as well as they would have liked, will have to look at their performances to see how they can be improved.

There has been a change in the attitude of parents and the general public to tests, and particularly to the publication of the results in the form of league tables. Every year, I send a questionnaire to thousands of my constituents asking them a range of questions. For the past few years, I have asked whether they support the principle of testing and the publication of the results. Between 800 and 1,100 people usually respond, so it is a good sample. The increase in support for the regular testing of pupils has gone up from 73 per cent. of all respondents in 1993 to 80 per cent. this year.

More interesting is the turnround in people's views on whether the results should be made public. In 1993, 38 per cent. of respondents were in favour and 50 per cent. were against. The support for the publication of results went up to 42 per cent. in 1994 and to 46 per cent. in 1995; this year, 50 per cent. of respondents were in favour of publishing examination results and only 32 per cent. were against. People want the information, and it is clear from the figures that I have quoted that we are winning that argument.

Returning to the specific problem under consideration, what is the cause of the under-achievement? Last week's Ofsted report blamed weak teaching, inadequate lesson planning, poor teacher training and a lack of leadership by some head teachers. It appears that we are paying the price for more than 30 years of so-called progressive teaching in our schools, and for education being the vehicle for creating an egalitarian society as part of socialist efforts at social engineering. During those 30 years, child-centred learning in mixed-ability classes has done untold damage to many thousands of pupils. Reversing the process is taking much time and much effort, but reverse it we must.

Socialists at every level have been driving that process of so-called progressive education. A Labour Government introduced comprehensive education and the teaching

reforms that changed the approach to education. Children betrayed in Islington, Southwark and Tower Hamlets have been betrayed under Labour local education authorities.

As hon. Members know only too well, some middle-class parents living in those regions are sufficiently well-to-do to be able to send their offspring to grant-maintained schools, outside their local education authorities. Let us not forget that the Labour party has opposed all our efforts, both in the House of Commons and in local education authorities throughout the country, to give more information and power to parents.

Labour has nothing to offer parents of pupils, and it was most illuminating that the Secondary Heads Association should describe the Labour party's recent education policy as simplistic, bland, short of ideas, unlikely to assist in raising school standards, poorly thought out, uncosted, lacking in detail and an uncomfortable combination of the naive and messianic. All those comments were contained in the SHA's report.

So, away from Labour and back to the real world. One of the most common complaints I hear when I visit schools is that Ministers and others are for ever criticising teachers. I always reply that those same people spend enormous time praising teachers, although pointing out that more needs to be done. The problem is that the teachers hear or read only what the media report, and it is the criticisms that are reported.

My experience is that the majority of teachers are hard-working, dedicated and committed to their pupils. Of course, as in any profession, some teachers are not up to the job, and should not be teaching. Last week's Ofsted report, however, was critical of teaching methods, and it is fair to say that the vast majority of teachers have experienced their training during the past 30 years, when so-called progressive teaching methods have prevailed.

In 1991, Robin Alexander, from the university of Leeds, said in the summary document that accompanied his report "Primary Education in Leeds":

"The document raises important questions about the reliability and efficacy of classroom methods and strategies widely commended in primary education since the mid-1960s. In common with several other studies it shows how the widespread commitment to group work, multiple curriculum focus teaching (different groups of children working simultaneously in different areas of the curriculum), thematic curriculum planning and delivery and enquiry modes of teacher/pupil interaction may present teachers with problems of class organisation which subvert the quality of children's learning and frustrate teachers' monitoring of that learning.

The project highlighted the prevalence of the power of certain orthodoxies of primary teaching methods and the extent to which many teachers feel obliged to conform to these while in some cases being all too conscious of the problems they may pose. It is likely that this conformist culture has elevated particular class practices into ends in themselves."

That is the most extraordinary and damning comment imaginable; some teachers are apparently following practices simply to conform with the prevailing culture. That clearly needs to change.

I do not for a moment claim to have any great expertise on teaching methods, but last week's Ofsted report is clear that more whole-class teaching should take place in schools, along with more effective group work. The report also says that teachers have to be more knowledgeable about reading in order to teach it successfully. In particular, the report said that phonics contributed to the accuracy and fluency of reading by children of all abilities where it was taught well.

Last August, we saw a remarkable experiment, when Irina Tyk and others set up and ran the Butterfly reading project on the Mozart estate in London. It involved a highly structured method of teaching children to read and spell according to the phonic or alphabetic method. The children were sitting at desks in rows facing the front. They were working individually within a whole class. The result was that the 27 children aged between seven and 12 returned to school in September armed with written reports which showed that, in 30 hours of teaching on the 10-day course, their reading ages had been raised by an average of 13 and a half months. I should like to know what lessons the Department for Education and Employment has taken on board from that remarkable course.

Last week's report also showed that mixed-ability classes were in use in some schools. It said:

"These were more difficult for the teachers to manage and the pace of reading tended to be geared to the slower learners."

Mixed-ability classes, part of education's drive for equality, are still too prevalent, and I have seen them in primary schools in my constituency. I believe that, where it is feasible to do so, schools should be setting pupils by ability, so that all the pupils in a class are progressing at more or less a similar level, so that the less able are not holding back the more able and the more able are not intimidating the less able.

What is becoming increasingly apparent is that teacher training is crucial. Too many of the progressive notions being implemented in our schools today have been inculcated into teachers at teacher training colleges. Last week's report said that the vast majority of teachers held appropriate initial qualifications and were trained for the primary phase. Yet, as the report said, in spite of an array of professional qualifications, many of them related to reading, it was apparent that many of the teachers in both year groups lacked the range of skills they needed to teach reading in those schools.

Many teachers told the inspectors that they did not believe that their initial training had provided them with the proper equipment to teach reading. I want to ask my hon. Friend the Minister what further steps the Government intend to take to try to improve the quality of teacher training in this country.

I believe that every parent should be enormously grateful to the chief inspector of schools, Chris Woodhead. Mr. Woodhead is determined to improve the quality of teaching in this country, so that all pupils can maximise their learning potential. It is a source of enormous regret that 50 Labour Members have seen fit to sign an early-day motion calling for his resignation, simply because he has, in their view, attacked teachers and comprehensive education. That EDM says more about today's Labour party than it does about Mr. Woodhead. I say to Mr. Woodhead, "Keep up the good work."

I hope that this short debate has been useful. The ability to read properly and clearly is crucial to young people, and much clearly still needs to be done in our schools. I hope that the Minister will be able to demonstrate that the Government, like Chris Woodhead, are determined to take additional action to improve the quality of reading and all other subjects in our schools. I look forward to what he has to say.

11.58 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Robin Squire): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Mr. Riddick) for raising this subject, and for the thoughtful and intelligent way in which he developed his argument. He has long established a reputation for knowledge in this sphere of education and for not being afraid to express strong opinions. I welcome that, as does the House, and I thought that tonight he gave an excellent demonstration of his range of knowledge.

I will write to my hon. Friend in response to the specific query he raised about the impressive teaching skills demonstrated in the experiment during the summer months. Like my hon. Friend, I should like to see it developed further.

Ensuring that reading is taught effectively is, quite simply, essential. Pupils' progress depends on good reading skills. Without a sound grounding, their performance in other subjects is bound to suffer. For primary schools to fail to teach children to read well is simply unacceptable.

I share in full the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley about the weaknesses highlighted by last week's Ofsted report. The report exposes a shocking picture of poor teaching methods, coupled with a lack of leadership and monitoring of teachers' performance by head teachers. The use of teaching methods that were clearly not working is at the heart of the problem, and we cannot allow it to continue.

Unfortunately, as my hon. Friend has said tonight and as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has previously pointed out, other reports by Her Majesty's inspectorate and other sources suggest that the problem is not limited to a few London boroughs.

Our education reforms have set in place a framework designed to improve the standards of teaching and learning in all subjects. The national curriculum sets out clear expectations of pupils at key ages as a focus for teachers' efforts. There are arrangements for assessment to common national standards so that schools and teachers can see how well they are doing. Teaching quality is the subject of published reports by registered inspectors. How schools are serving their pupils is therefore much more a matter of public record and—now, as we all know—public debate.

That greater accountability is helping, and will help further, to lever up standards. Heads will know in future from Ofsted reports about the very good and very poor performers among their staff. In the light of the current review of appraisal arrangements, they should have regular and reliable information on the teaching quality of all their staff.

As my hon. Friend has said, how far and how fast we can raise standards will depend on the quality of the teaching force. We have many excellent teachers—as my hon. Friend is well aware, not only I but my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State regularly make that point—but there is clearly much still to be done to improve standards.

We established the Teacher Training Agency about 18 months ago to tackle standards in initial and in-service training. The agency has made progress. It is linking funding and quality in initial training. It is working on a much clearer statement of essential teaching skills. From September, all primary teacher training courses must include at least 50 hours on the teaching of reading within at least 150 hours on the teaching of English. We must ensure that teacher training courses use that time well, and do not recycle the methods discredited by Ofsted's findings.

Thanks to the TTA, Her Majesty's inspectors can report publicly on the quality of initial training courses. They are nearing the end of a programme of inspection covering all primary initial teacher training, which has had a particular focus on the teaching of English. When institutions are identified as not providing quality training, the TTA will take vigorous action, including, if it proves necessary, withdrawing accreditation and the right to train teachers.

Those procedures are already having a real impact. We know that the publication of a recent critical Ofsted report on Charlotte Mason college has caused Lancaster university to consider its future role in initial teacher training. I know that discussions are continuing about the best future for the college, and I am sure that the university and the funding bodies will take full account of the views of students and staff; but we cannot disregard the great importance to pupils of well-trained teachers, and poor provision must be quickly brought up to scratch if it is to remain. Ofsted and the TTA are working together on a joint quality framework to tighten up inspection and quality assessment for the future.

My hon. Friend welcomed the fact that performance tables were to be produced for 11-year-olds, beginning with this year's tests, and I thank him for welcoming that development. We are now in a position to consider introducing performance tables for initial teacher training institutions. Tables would increase the information available to those considering training to be teachers, and stimulate providers to raise standards. The information might include Ofsted grades for training providers, as well as other performance indicators, such as how successful students are in finding employment, or how well newly qualified teachers are graded in Ofsted school inspections.

But it is not only new teachers who need training. There are only 20,000 newly qualified teachers each year, compared with 400,000 teachers already in classrooms. The TTA is working to improve in-service training for those teachers. It is defining the skills needed for expert classroom teaching; it has commissioned materials to help primary teachers assess their training needs in the core subjects, including English; and it is carrying out research into the effective teaching of literacy.

But we cannot yet be confident that the available in-service training is effective in meeting the needs of our teachers. We invest £400 million a year in such training, in cash and in teachers' time, so we need to be sure that we are getting value for the money and effort involved. The TTA produced an initial report last year, and my right hon. Friend has now asked it to work with Ofsted on a further review.

The Government have taken a specific initiative to tackle the teaching of literacy, with the establishment of 13 literacy centres, based in LEAs, under the national direction of John Stannard—a member of Her Majesty's inspectorate who is well placed to put Ofsted's messages about good teaching practice into effect.

Each centre will work intensively with local schools to audit current strengths and weaknesses, to set targets for pupils' achievements, and to give teaching staff the necessary support and training to ensure that the targets are met. We shall ensure that the national training and other materials produced by the project are available to help schools all over the country. The project is being run by the Department in partnership with Ofsted, the TTA, the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority and the Basic Skills Agency, as well as with the 13 LEAs involved.

The latest Ofsted report on reading in three London boroughs, which my hon. Friend and I have both already mentioned, revealed that school leadership was effective in promoting the teaching of reading in only one third of the primary schools. We know that the quality of leadership is crucial to the success of any school. That is why we have invested so significantly in training specifically for head teachers. Last year, the TTA launched the head teachers' leadership and management programme—HEADLAMP, as it is known—which provides up to £2,500 to meet the training needs of newly appointed head teachers.

But that is only a start. Through the tough new national professional qualification for headship, details of which were announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State last week, we shall equip deputy head teachers with the skills necessary to become effective heads. The qualification will be available from next September, and will be rigorously assessed to national standards. For candidates to pass, they must be assessed in five key areas covering the full range of leadership and management skills.

Whatever other training they have received, head teachers must take a compulsory training module in strategic direction, and the implementation, monitoring and review of school policies and practices, so that they can make sure that policies on reading are followed through and carried out in every classroom and for the benefit of every pupil.

The Government have set the right framework, but there is a limit to what Government alone can do. Our role is to establish the framework; schools, LEAs and teacher trainers must accept their responsibilities for ensuring high standards of teaching. It is up to schools and their head teachers to ensure that they are complying with the national curriculum. It is inexcusable, for example, that almost half the schools covered by the recent Ofsted report were not meeting all the requirements of the national curriculum programmes of study for reading.

For far too long, too many primary schools, especially in inner-city areas, have been allowed to fail to meet their pupils' reading needs. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will meet the three LEAs involved in the latest report and ask what action they intend to take. However, as the problems highlighted in the report are scarcely confined to those three LEAs, we shall also ensure that all LEAs are alerted to those Ofsted findings.

We owe it to pupils and to their parents to ensure that poor teaching of reading is not allowed to continue. Pupils in the most deprived areas have the most need for the skills that can offer them a better future. Our reforms have put in place the framework for delivering high standards, and the new measures announced last week will strengthen that. We must now press on until higher standards are delivered in each and every classroom. Schools, LEAs and teacher trainers have to take their responsibilities seriously, and we will ensure that their performance is carefully monitored.

Again, I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley for raising the issue today. I hope that I have been able, in part, to satisfy him that the Government fully share the seriousness that he attaches to the teaching of reading in our schools.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at nine minutes past Twelve midnight.

House of Commons

Wednesday 15 May 1996

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Privatisation

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Bates.]*

9.35 am

Mr. John Marshall (Hendon, South): When Baroness Thatcher formed her first Administration in 1979, she was committed to a policy of privatisation because she believed that it would increase industrial efficiency, that it would lead to higher investment once the industries were removed from the dead hand of the Treasury, that the industries would provide a better service for the consumer and that that was in the national interest.

It is significant that in 1978-79, the external financing requirement of the nationalised industries was £2 billion. It is ironic that today they pay into the Treasury as much in corporation tax as they took out of it that year for their financial needs. The true extent of the Thatcherite revolution can be seen from the fact that when the Leader of the Opposition went to the United States he assured the Americans that it was safe in his hands.

Privatisation has led to a massive increase in investment. For example, British Telecom has invested more than £20 billion and it has given £7.6 billion back to the taxpayer in corporation tax. The water industry has invested £15 billion—with Thames Water investing £2.5 billion and South West Water investing more than £1 billion. PowerGen has invested more than £2 billion.

Investment has been accompanied by a massive increase in efficiency. For example, in British Telecom the number of full-time employees fell from 241,000 in 1984 to 137,500 in 1995. At the same time, the number of exchange line connections increased from 19,828 to 27,077 and the number of connections per employee increased from 82 to 197—an increase of 140 per cent. over 11 years.

British Gas, PowerGen, National Power, British Airways, the British Steel Corporation and the regional electricity companies have also experienced increases in efficiency. For example, British Steel saw a reduction in the number of its employees from 67,000 in 1986 to 40,000 in 1995. Turnover per employee more than doubled over that time and productivity increased by 50 per cent. PowerGen did even better in terms of productivity—it doubled over five years.

London Electricity's sales per employee increased by one third over four years. Over four years, it reduced the number of its employees by 26 per cent. and it increased capital expenditure by 22 per cent. British Airways—the world's favourite airline—is no longer subsidised and it saw a growth in productivity of 60 per cent. between 1987 and 1995. In British Gas sales per employee increased by 120 per cent. between 1985 and 1994.

There are those who would say that the reduction in the number of employees created unemployment, but that is not true. One has to look at employment in the economy as a whole. One does not increase employment in the energy-intensive industries by forcing them to pay more for their gas and electricity. The price of gas and electricity has dropped in real terms, which has led to increased employment in energy-intensive industries because they are now much more competitive. We have to recognise that it is unfair to force pensioners and the low paid to pay more for gas, as happened when the industry was nationalised as compared with when it is in the private sector.

Productivity increases have been accompanied by a dramatic rise in the quality of customer service. When I lived in Ealing in the early 1980s, I remember getting off the train and trying to use a pay telephone at the station. One could guarantee that many telephones would not work. I shall cite some figures that demonstrate the huge improvement in the pay telephone service in this country. In 1987, there were 80,000 pay telephones, of which 77 per cent. usually worked—that is, 61,600 telephones. Today there are 128,000 pay telephones, of which 96 per cent.—or 122,880 telephones—usually work.

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman (Lancaster) *rose—*

Mr. Marshall: No, I shall not give way as the debate is time limited. We have lost three minutes due to prayers—which is a worthy cause—so I shall not give way to anyone.

The number of working pay telephones has increased by 99.5 per cent. since 1987. What is true of pay telephones is equally true of other BT services. In 1984, only 74 per cent. of residential telephones were installed within the timeframe promised to the customer. Today the figure is 96.6 per cent. In 1984, 76 per cent. of private circuits were completed by the promised date. Today the figure is 98.4 per cent. It is no wonder that in January this year the Director General of Oftel said:

> "Comparisons with statistics on BT's performance pre-privatisation and later in the 1980s show customers today are benefiting from significantly improved services".

BT has delivered to the customer not only better services but lower prices. Local calls now cost 34 per cent. less in real terms than before privatisation. The price of a local call in Britain is lower than in Germany, and our local call areas are twice as large as in Germany, four times larger than in the United States and 12 times larger than in Canada. The price of national calls has fallen by 64 per cent. and the price of international calls has fallen by 46 per cent. in real terms.

What is true of BT is equally true of British Airways. It made a loss when nationalised, but is now the world's favourite airline. British Steel, which lost markets when in the public sector, has managed to rebuild its export markets. Even motorway service stations, which were the butt of the humorist when the land was owned by the state, perform much better.

The water companies—about which we occasionally hear the odd word of criticism—have improved also. South West Water now has 99.6 per cent. compliance with the drinking water directive and another 50 beaches in

[Mr. Marshall]

its area meet European Union standards. The privatised industries have delivered better services and lower prices. Earlier this year, electricity consumers benefited from the flotation of the national grid and saw their electricity bills decrease by £50. Due to the operation of Ofgas, gas consumers will see their gas bills decrease by £50 also. That is what competition and privatisation do for the consumer. Industries such as gas, electricity and telecommunications are much more tightly regulated in the private sector than in the public sector.

Privatisation has also encouraged wider share ownership. There were about 2 million to 3 million shareholders in 1978-79. Today there are 10 million private shareholders—many of whom are employees of the former nationalised industries. I remember visiting National Freight in the mid-1980s. I asked a telephonist whether she owned shares in the company and she replied that she did. She continued, "The only trouble is that I listened to the trade unions and did not buy as many shares as I should have. I would be better off today if I had bought more". The trade unions told my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) that the privatisation of National Freight would not work, but it has been a major success.

An amusing aside is that some of the trade unions that were so critical of privatisation have been willing to invest in the privatised industries. The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, which is telling people not to invest in Railtrack, has invested in Eastern Electricity—where it took a nice turn—in Thames Water, British Gas and in Cable and Wireless. The GMB is the prize example of a trade union that has invested in privatised stock. It invested £170,000 in British Aerospace, a mere £62,000 in British Airways, £201,000 in British Steel, £230,000 in Enterprise Oil and £131,000 in Cable and Wireless. It has sold its investments of £22,000 in the British Airports Authority, £30,000 in BT and £134,000 in Rolls-Royce. That union has invested a total of £530,000 in privatised stock. I sometimes suspect that, when the Trades Union Congress meets, its members discuss their investments in the privatised utilities and decide which one to go for next.

A document entitled "From Finchley to the World" was published some years ago upon Baroness Thatcher's completion of 10 years in office. It referred to her role on the world stage, but it could have referred also to the fact that privatisation—which is such a success in the United Kingdom—has been copied across the globe. Every Government in the free world—from Russia in the east, to Australia in the south and to Canada in the west—is committed to privatisation policies. Some of the most enthusiastic apostles of privatisation come from the former communist countries: they discovered that the dismal performance of centrally planned economies can be righted only through the introduction of the private sector.

As I said at the beginning of my speech, the Leader of the Opposition said in Washington that he would defend the Thatcherite revolution. I suspect that he said that not out of conviction, but as an act of political cynicism and convenience: he recognises that privatisation is popular with consumers and with the general public.

Privatisation involves much more than simply selling state assets: it involves using free enterprise to provide services for the public and it involves compulsory competitive tendering, which has saved council taxpayers £400 million. Those hon. Members who would abolish compulsory competitive tendering must tell the council taxpayers of this country how they would account for the £400 million saving which has led to better service provision by local authorities and to lower council tax bills.

In talking about privatisation, one must mention also the private finance initiative. It is not simply a funding initiative—if it were, it would be bad value for the taxpayer because the Treasury can always borrow more cheaply than a public company. The private finance initiative involves using private sector management skills to accomplish tasks that would not be achieved as efficiently in the state sector. That is demonstrated by the application of the PFI in prisons and the health service and particularly with the new Northern line trains. That is one of the earliest and most successful PFI projects which will allow many of my constituents to travel in better trains next year. Let us hope that those trains are delivered and are up and running before the general election.

Privatisation has led to a much better performance by the British economy. The concept is copied across the world and it has benefited consumers, industrialists and the economy at large. I look forward to hearing the Minister commend it to the House.

9.48 am

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Michael Jack): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon, South (Mr. Marshall) on securing the debate, and on the robust and enthusiastic way in which he has endorsed a revolution in the way in which business is done in this country. I am grateful to him for giving us the opportunity to take stock of our privatisation programme's successes, which he so eloquently put before the House. I hope that the Opposition will take the opportunity of taking stock of what he has said by reading his perceptive comments. It is sad that they are not here in large numbers to hear what we have to say.

The Labour party now talks about being in favour of private enterprise, but, as my hon. Friend mentioned, in practice, it has consistently opposed each privatisation. It talks about promoting stakeholding, but, again, it has opposed privatisation, which has offered the opportunity for real stakeholding by millions of consumers and shareholders in this country's key industries.

It is worth reminding ourselves of the fundamental nature of the changes that my hon. Friend has attested to. In 1979, nationalised industries cost the taxpayer some £50 million a week. Now privatised industries contribute some £55 million a week to the Exchequer. We have increased the size of the private sector by an amount equivalent to 9 per cent. of gross domestic product.

In 1979, nationalised industries accounted for more than 11 per cent. of GDP; now it is around 2 per cent. Forty-eight major businesses and dozens of others have been privatised, with Railtrack to follow next week. A total of 950,000 jobs have been transferred into the private sector. Proceeds have totalled £64 billion, helping to reduce Government debt, to restore public finances and to free up resources for private investment. My hon. Friend rightly drew our attention to the fact that we have increased the number of shareholders from 3 million to 10 million, more than tripling the number of people with a real stake in this country's major businesses.

We have provided the framework for competition and real choice, putting the consumer in the driving seat as the privatised industries have to focus on meeting the consumer's aspirations as well as those of their shareholders. That consumer aspect makes such a fundamental difference between the old nationalised approach and the privatised approach.

Before privatisation, nationalised industries operated in a regime that was against the interests of the public, in whose name they were ostensibly run. Their prices were set at the whim of Whitehall as their management were shielded from the commercial realities of competition and the profit motive. They had no incentive to improve service to their customers, and their investment needs often went unfulfilled as commercially sensible investment was routinely squeezed out in the face of more pressing public spending needs.

The resulting inefficiencies were paid for by the customer through higher prices and poor service, by the taxpayer through subsidy, and by the economy generally through underinvestment. As my hon. Friend rightly said, privatisation has dealt with those issues. In contrast, the transfer to the private sector, where there is the discipline of the market or, where necessary, of independent regulation, has transformed the performance of our once nationalised companies.

A key factor in achieving that has been to introduce competition, wherever possible. That offers the best long-term benefits to consumers. As my hon. Friend rightly pointed out, we see the effects of that in telecommunications, where prices are down and where choice and quality are up. Telecommunication prices have fallen by 40 per cent. in real terms and, as someone whose teenage son has discovered his first girlfriend, I can now, because of the large reduction in bills, allow him to use the telephone without fear. Telephone calls cost less than in France, Germany or Italy.

Most customers have greater choice of telecommunication supplies. All have access to Mercury for long-distance calls. There are some 4.5 million mobile telephone subscribers, twice as many as in most European countries, a true communication revolution occasioned by the advent of privatisation.

In gas and electricity, there has been substantial change. So far, larger industrial customers have benefited from competition in supply. As a result, industrial prices for gas and electricity are at their lowest level since 1970, but domestic customers are soon to benefit. From 1998, they will be able to choose supplies. Nine companies have been licensed to supply gas in the south-west. There are pilot schemes and price reductions range from 15 per cent. to 20 per cent. That will maintain the momentum of price reductions—gas bills have already fallen by 17 per cent. In general, privatisation has meant that typical household bills for gas, water and electricity have fallen by £75 per year.

Freed from the constraints of competing for public funds for investment, privatised companies have been able to spend sums on improving their business on a scale that would not have been possible in the public sector. I make no apology for repeating the points that my hon. Friend mentioned. British Telecom has invested £25 billion and water investment has doubled in five years. A £15 billion programme means that Britain's water is, again as my hon. Friend reminded the House, among the cleanest in Europe and there is £24 billion more to come in the next 10 years.

It is not, however, just the former utilities that have benefited. As my hon. Friend reminded the House, no one who has experienced the service provided by British Airways, or who has witnessed the business performance of companies such as Rolls-Royce, British Steel or British Aerospace should doubt that they have benefited enormously from taking their rightful place in the private sector.

Despite that, our critics say that the privatisation programme is on its last legs. Nothing could be further from the truth. The privatisation of Britain's railway industry—one of the most complex and far reaching of any of our privatisations—is coming to its climax. The three passenger rolling stock companies have been sold through a competition raising £1.8 billion. Seven franchises have been awarded bids. Bids have been invited for a further five and the pre-qualification process is under way for another eight.

The Railtrack flotation is nearing completion, with shares due to start trading on 20 May. Around £1.9 million registrations were received from the public, clearly showing the all-round interest in Railtrack. I look forward to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport announcing on Monday next the outcome of the offer.

I also look forward to that privatisation bringing about a fundamental change for the better in the culture and performance of the railway industry. So much of the carping comment from Labour Members is about service cuts. The reverse is true. The industry is keen to attract new passengers. For example, many franchisees are committed to enhancing services with new rolling stock. On the London, Tilbury and Southend line between Fenchurch street and Southend, the franchisee is to procure new rolling stock for two thirds of the existing fleet.

On the midland main line, the franchisee will procure new air-conditioned trains to run additional stopping services between St. Pancras, Derby and Nottingham. Additionally, services are to be enhanced with a proposed service pattern in 1999 offering a dramatic increase in service levels—for example, 10 more services each week day to and from Derby, 10 each week day for Nottingham and 22 for Leicester. Likewise, the London-Gatwick service will dramatically improve. Although looking to the future, I should like to remind the House that, later this summer, there will be the sale of British Energy, including the most modern of our nuclear generating stations.

Our privatisation programme has not been confined to former nationalised industries. We have been vigorously pursuing a programme to increase the private sector's role in the provision of services hitherto undertaken by the civil service. This year, the Laboratory of the Government Chemist, the Natural Resources Institute and English Heritage's historic property restoration have been transferred to the private sector. Among the civil service candidates for privatisation this year are Her Majesty's Stationery Office and the Chessington Computer Centre. Further candidates are actively being sought. We remain committed to transferring to the private sector activities that will benefit from that.

It is clear, therefore, that our enthusiasm for the privatisation programme remains undimmed, but privatisation is only one part of our drive to bring private sector skills into public service provision. Contracting out is another, but, most exciting, as my hon. Friend

[Mr. Michael Jack]

mentioned, is the private finance initiative. That is directed at enhancing the benefits that the private sector can bring to the management of economy sectors that were once the public sector's exclusive preserve. In particular, we are interested in developing partnerships between the public and private sectors, with the former as purchasers of service and the private sector as provider, with quality and cost-effective public services as a result.

My hon. Friend was right to attest to the Northern line. That £400 million contract requires the delivery of a level of reliability four times that of the best fleet currently operating on the underground. As somebody who used to travel on the route, I can well appreciate my hon. Friend's enthusiasm for that development.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon, South also drew the House's attention to one of Britain's best invisible exports. It is not so much invisible in the way in which its profile is exercised. The sale of our expertise in privatisation has made us the envy of the world.

All the change that my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon, South described in accurate detail has clearly brought about a change in the Labour party's attitude, which, in accepting the importance of the private sector, has surely conceded the argument that privatisation is right. Nothing showed that more clearly than its attitude to British Telecom. In 1984, at the time of flotation, the Labour party said that it would return to public ownership the public assets and rights—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Janet Fookes): Order.

Regulation of Accountancy (AGIP)

10 am

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby): The title of the debate has been changed slightly. The original title was about money laundering. Unfortunately, it appears that if a debate concerns money laundering, it requires a response from the Treasury, which does not appear to know all that much about it. I aim to raise the role of accountants in money laundering, and I congratulate the Under–Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Mr. Oppenheim), on his happy lot in having to reply to the debate. I am sure that he will enjoy it.

The problem is whether we can regulate accountancy to stop the complicity of accountants in money laundering. That complicity must be on a considerable scale because the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development estimates that about £500 billion-worth of funny money is being laundered through western financial institutions—through drugs, crime, and fraud, but mostly drugs. Much of that money must be coming through the United Kingdom and London. Accountants must be involved. Such activity cannot be undertaken without the complicity of accountants in setting up shell companies, fiddling the figures and covering the tracks—and not only small-time accountants and individual companies either. Some of the biggest accountancy houses are involved, too. One must ask why such houses are so keen to set up their organisations in places such as the Channel Islands if it is not to participate in such activity and to do so covertly.

The problem is that it is very difficult to discover money laundering. The tragedy of the case to which I shall refer was that when it was discovered what was going on—it was fairly clear that money laundering had been taking place—Governments and regulators, who are now committed and should have been then to stopping money laundering, and professionals and administrators just did not want to know about it and did not seem able to deal with it.

AGIP (Africa), a company incorporated in Jersey, in the oil business in Tunisia and a subsidiary of ENI, the big Italian group, was involved in money laundering. I am not sure why and whether it was being defrauded by its chief accountant, Mr. Zdin, who was making double payments on invoices, or whether the company itself was involved and authorised the activity. Certainly, from March 1983 to January 1985, the company was defrauded of, or laundered, $10.5 million by altering 27 orders and invoices. Such activity had clearly been going on far longer than that—probably since 1976.

The money was paid to the shell or cut-out companies in England—a process apparently unnoticed by the auditors of AGIP (Africa), Coopers and Lybrand. Indeed, Coopers and Lybrand gave AGIP unqualified annual reports in each of the years concerned. The annual report for 1984, which was again unqualified and dated 26 March 1985, came after the discovery of what had been going on in January that year. Did Coopers and Lybrand know about the activity? Was it co-operating with something that the company wanted—to transfer money through Tunisia's exchange regulations? I do not know, and the question remains unanswered.

The system of transferring money had been developed by Mr. Roger Humphrey, who was introduced to it by Yves Coulon, the lawyer of the French interests to whom the money was eventually being transferred. Mr. Humphrey worked first for Minet trust in Guernsey, which used such systems, then for the Tyndall bank, taking the systems with him, and finally, in 1982, he became a partner of Thornton Baker, which is now Grant Thornton.

Yves Coulon wanted to transfer the schemes to Thornton's as had been done on each previous occasion. Humphrey did not think that that would be possible, so the money was transferred to a correspondent firm, Jackson and Co., accountants in the Isle of Man, although Grant Thornton continued to charge fees for acting as the authorised signatories and to provide companies through which the money was being laundered. I have the invoices and the evidence that that was going on.

Mr. Humphrey introduced Jacksons not only to Coulon, who then worked directly with the company, but to the High Holborn branch of Lloyds bank. The procedure for laundering the money was to set up a shell company with no assets and no activity, and after two or three payments had been transferred through it and immediately paid out, it was wound up, closed and put into liquidation. A new account was then set up for the successor company. The money was then transferred to a firm called Euro-Arabian Jewellery, which also had its account at the High Holborn branch of Lloyds bank, and then straight to France—mostly to Kinz Joaillier, a firm with which Roberto Calvi, the man who was found hanging under the Blackfriars bridge, was associated. Whether he was inspecting the bridge in an unusual fashion or his death was a mafia-type murder, we have not yet authenticated. It did not seem to be suicide.

All those events are typical symptoms of the process of money laundering. In the Institute of Chartered Accountants' advice to accountants, "Spotting Moneylaundering", it says that typical symptoms of money laundering are:

"The forming of companies or trusts with no apparent commercial or other purpose"—

which is exactly what was going on—and

"The use of financial, legal or other advisers"

—Jackson and Co. and Grant Thornton—

"to provide their names as directors or trustees, with little or no commercial involvement.

Unusual transactions with companies registered overseas"

—Kinz Joaillier in France. All those activities are classic symptoms of money laundering, yet nobody claims to have known what was going on. When it was suggested that the institute should inquire into the matters, it began to argue that it had no idea whether money laundering was in process.

The fraud, if it was a fraud, was discovered by AGIP in January 1985. It sued—interestingly enough not for all the money, which was almost certainly much more than $10 million, but for the last sum transferred, which was about $500,000 and 92 cents, which was an interesting rounding up.

The case was heard at the Chancery Division of the High Court, where the judge, Mr. Justice Millett, was scathing in his judgment about the accountancy firms involved in the transfer. He said:

"Mr. Jackson and Mr. Griffin"—

the Isle of Man accountants—

"are professional men. They obviously knew they were laundering money . . . It must have been obvious to them that their clients could not afford their activities to see the light of day.

Jackson and Co. were introduced to the High Holborn branch of Lloyds Bank PLC in March 1983 by a Mr Humphrey, a partner in the well known firm of Thornton Baker now part of Grant Thornton. They probably took over an established arrangement. Thenceforth they provided the payee companies . . .

In each case Mr. Jackson and Mr. Griffin were the directors and the authorised signatories on the company's account at Lloyds Bank. In the case of the first few companies Mr. Humphrey"—

a partner in Grant Thornton—

"was also a director and authorised signatory."

In other words, it was money laundering. The people had been caught bang to rights, and a very strong judgment indicated that accountants had been complicit in the process.

I therefore took up the matter and referred the case to the regulators, who are supposed to ensure that the profession functions according to honest standards of high integrity and that such derelictions do not occur.

In January 1991 and February 1991, I referred the matter to the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Corporate Affairs. He did not seem to be particularly interested in the matter, but he replied that he had no powers to deal with it and that it was a matter for the police and for the recognised supervisory body, the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales.

The matter began to get more serious and more melodramatic at this point. The story is almost like a thriller in many respects—although it may not be very thrilling at the moment. In June 1991, after I had referred the matter to what I considered to be the appropriate regulators in this country, Yves Coulon—the French middleman and lawyer at the French end of the operation—was due to give evidence on the matter to a tribunal in Paris. He was interviewed by an *Accountancy Age* journalist, Stuart Mansell, and agreed that he should put the story on the record—that he should spill the beans. However, he warned:

"A former Conservative cabinet minister still very prominent in politics was available to provide protection . . . A major organisation involved in the affair had the powers of a government. They've got an important politician in England who is looking after their interests. They and he will make sure things do not get out."

Yves Colon added that he feared a fate similar to that of Mr. Calvi, at the hands of the same people. I do not know who "the same people" are. The P2 Masonic lodge was reported to have been involved in the Calvi affair, but I do not know whether it was a reference to P2. The point is that, on the day after giving that information to the journalist and promising that he would very shortly unveil the story and make it public and before he had appeared before the French tribunal, he was shot dead, with a single bullet through the head. No one has ever been charged with that murder. That is the melodramatic part of what, had it not been for a bullet through the head, I could have described as a heady brew.

I went back to the regulatory trail to see what would happen and whether there would be an inquiry into the matter, because it cried out for an inquiry. I wrote, first, to the Chairman of the Select Committee on Trade and Industry. He did not reply. I wrote to the Prime Minister, mentioning the accusations against a former Cabinet Minister and urging investigation. He referred me to the police and to the Isle of Man authorities.

[Mr. Austin Mitchell]

I went to the Serious Fraud Office, which said that its authority was limited to England and Wales—an area that appeared not to include Lloyd's bank in High Holborn, although I had always though that that was part of England and Wales. I went to the Isle of Man authorities, who told me, "We are not doing anything." I must say that the Isle of Man is a wonderful place to do just that—nothing.

I wrote to the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, offering them the 20,000 pages of evidence on the affair which had been made available by Jackson and Co. in the Isle of Man. Jackson and Co. was anxious to volunteer that evidence and anxious that the case should be fully investigated. It offered that evidence to me, to the institute and to the regulators, but no one took up the offer.

The institute fell silent, saying that it could not comment on an investigation then in progress. I did not find out exactly what progress there was until March 1994, when I again wrote to the Serious Fraud Office about why nothing had been done about the case. The Serious Fraud Office—not the institute—told me that the institute had decided not to pursue the matter any further.

I wrote then to the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Corporate Affairs, in the Department for Trade and Industry, saying that that really was not good enough. He replied that his officials were still discussing the matter with the institute. So discussions were taking place after the report had been finalised.

Finally, in May 1994—in response to a further letter from me—the institute coughed. It said that it had inquired into the matter but could not do anything about it, even though all the symptoms of illegality—according to its own indicators for detecting money laundering—were present. The institute said that although the members must have known that their activity was illegal, the institute could not prove that they knew it was illegal. Therefore, unless the institute could prove that the accountants involved knew that the activity was illegal, it could not do anything about it.

The judge had said that the activity was illegal and that the accountants involved must have known what was going on. But apparently the institute knew better than the court. No report was ever published or made available. There is no evidence that the institute interviewed Jackson in the Isle of Man, and there is certainly no evidence that it used or even examined the evidence that Jackson offered to it. So, effectively, it was not a proper inquiry but a hush-up.

The extent to which the inquiry was a hush-up cannot be revealed because the institute will not reveal the report. This has been an incredible legislative runaround, but it is typical of the fuddle one encounters when one tries to bring to book a matter of malpractice by accountants. That is because the system of regulation for accountancy is totally inadequate.

The mafia—I use the term jokingly, as a closed organisation—cannot regulate the mafia. The only way forward is to introduce independent regulation to intrude the public interest in these matters and to give the profession the backbone to restore its integrity—the integrity of what was once a profession but is now a big business, with big firms competing to sell services in intense competition and, therefore, prepared to comply with the desires of the management of the firms to which they offer audit services. To keep business, they are prepared to do the bidding of chief executives and to gratify their desires—by creative accountancy or by the creation of dodgy companies through which money can be laundered.

Tax schemes, dodgy companies and money laundering merge into one another on a downhill slope into illegality. As the *Observer* stated in an article of 31 March 1996:

"If you want to launder large sums of money forget banks and deposit accounts. The best way to avoid detection is through your friendly solicitor or accountant."

The article stated that of the 14,000 cases of money laundering reported to the National Criminal Intelligence Service since the introduction of the Criminal Justice Act 1993, only 50 were reported by accountants, compared with 13,700 from banks.

This is the only case in which we have hard and fast evidence of what is involved in the process of money laundering for clearly fraudulent purposes. The evidence has been submitted to the regulators, although they have done nothing because they are apparently not interested in inquiring into or coming to grips with the case. Given the allegations that have been made, why is that the case?

Having recounted the facts of the case, I tell the Minister that clearly there must be an effective—preferably independent—inquiry into the facts of the case. In particular, there should be an inquiry into the role of the big accountancy houses, like Coopers and Lybrand, the auditors for AGIP (Africa) in the Channel Islands, and Grant Thornton. Both of those firms must have known more than they let on, and certainly more than they have told to the regulators. Surely Coopers and Lybrand must have known about the transfer of money, for whatever purpose, by AGIP. Either the company did not detect that transfer, in which case it is a bad auditor, or it knew, in which case it was complicit. Grant Thornton charged fees for setting up companies through which money could be laundered.

Those of us who have raised the case with the Government and the relevant authorities have been fobbed off, so there is every reason for an inquiry. The Government say that they want to stamp out the practice of money laundering and that they do not want London to be the sleaze money laundering capital of the western financial system. If they want to get to grips with that problem they must inquire into the one case that has broken the surface in that system. Why keep fobbing someone like me off with excuses and claims that nothing wrong has gone on when the court has judged that money laundering took place?

Secondly, we must have a more effective system of regulation than the current structure of self-regulation by the professionals, which effectively means that the mafia is regulating the mafia, in the interests of the mafia. Public interest does not intrude. When professional interest, which means getting business for the big accountancy houses, conflicts with the public interest, it is always the professional interest that wins under the current system of regulation. We need to place a requirement on auditors to detect and report fraud—that should include the fraudulent process of money laundering.

I hope that the Government accept that we need a more open accountancy profession. The big accountancy houses must be involved to some extent in certain practices—

why else have they set up companies and organisations in the Channel Islands? Those secretive organisations tell us nothing about their actions. The stakeholders, whose accounts are being audited, get no information, and do not have access to the working papers. These accountancy houses are intensely powerful, but secretive organisations.

It is only by having an open profession, which is given backbone by independent regulation, that we will know what is going on. I ask for an inquiry into the case and a recognition by the Government that their structure of professional self-regulation has failed, will continue to fail and must be replaced.

10.22 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Phillip Oppenheim): I thank the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) for raising the issue of AGIP. I view with some admiration the terrier-like tenacity with which he has pursued it in the past few years.

As the hon. Gentleman has rightly pointed out, the plot is complex, with many twists and turns. It involves a murder and accusations that a Secretary of State has been involved with the mafia. In many respects, it resembles a Jacobean tragedy or perhaps the plot of a Grisham novel. That obviously suits the hon. Gentleman's mind bent.

I should like to relate the beginnings of the conspiracy. The fraud apparently began in 1976, as the hon. Gentleman stated, when AGIP (Africa) was apparently defrauded of $17 million by one of its Tunisian employees. The plot took a particularly dramatic turn with the assassination in court of a French lawyer, who was allegedly acting as a middle man in the affair.

As the hon. Gentleman correctly pointed out, there were even allegations that a former Secretary of State for Trade and Industry was involved in a "mafia-style protection racket". The Government face many accusations and many criticisms, but I am pleased to say that the accusation that we are involved in such protection rackets is, thankfully, uncommon and rare, and one that I hasten to deny.

The hon. Gentleman is right to raise certain points that have important implications for the United Kingdom, bearing in mind that the laundering allegedly took place between a company based in the Channel Islands and Tunisia. It is important to consider the role of the lawyers and auditors based on the Channel Islands, and whether they facilitated, in an illegal manner, the laundering of the money.

I should say to the hon. Gentleman that the involvement of a solicitor or a firm of accountants in setting up a company or the transfer of money abroad could be quite legitimate and would not necessarily imply that it was complicit in any illegal activities. It does not necessarily follow that, because a firm of accountants or solicitors was involved in such activities, it must have known, or should have known, about the illegal purpose, especially bearing in mind the fact that it was dealing with a large, reputable company—one of the largest oil companies in Europe, the owner of which is an Italian nationalised institution.

It is important to the United Kingdom to note that the allegation that the professionals involved should or could have known about the illegal activities has been properly investigated twice. The Serious Fraud Office could not find sufficient evidence of fraudulent or illegal activity. As the hon. Gentleman quite rightly pointed out, the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales also exhaustively investigated the audit firm and the allegations that it had facilitated the fraud. That lengthy investigation, which ran to 20,000 pages of evidence, concluded in 1994 that there was insufficient evidence to substantiate any investigation.

The institute has quite rightly said that if the hon. Gentleman can provide further evidence to change its conclusion, it will be happy to reconsider the case. If the hon. Gentleman has substantial evidence which he could put forward either to the SFO and the institute, they would be happy to reconsider the case. It is important to stress that there have been two full inquiries about the role of the auditors in the Channel Islands and no evidence has been found of complicity or wrongdoing. That is not to say that we should be complacent about the case. Although the affair started in 1976 and is now ancient history in some respects, it is important to ensure that, in future, there is only a minor possibility of such a case occurring again.

I should like to list the actions that we have taken in recent years to ensure that illegal money laundering does not take place. First, in terms of the scope of the UK money laundering legislation, the Criminal Justice Act 1993 introduced a number of new drug money laundering offences, which enabled the UK to implement fully the EC money laundering directive. The 1993 Act also extended a number of the previous drugs money laundering offences to the proceeds of other criminal activities. Under UK legislation, it is now an offence to acquire, possess or use the proceeds of crime in the knowledge that they are such proceeds.

It is important to note that it is also an offence to assist another person to retain or control the proceeds of crime by concealment, removal from the jurisdiction, transfer to nominees or otherwise. It is an offence to conceal and disguise one's own or another's property which is, or which represents, the proceeds of crime; to convert or transfer that property, or to remove it from the jurisdiction; to disclose anything likely to prejudice an investigation into money laundering; and to fail to report to a constable a knowledge or suspicion, in the course of one's trade that another person is engaged in money laundering.

It is therefore clear that the legislation has been significantly strengthened in the past few years. Failure to comply with the regulations constitutes an offence punishable by a maximum of two years' imprisonment or a fine, or both, irrespective of whether money laundering eventually took place. Those important changes have strengthened the legislation. They ensure that any offence of the type that might have happened in the AGIP (Africa) case in the 1970s will not be committed again.

The effect of that comprehensive legislation is to place requirements on all UK citizens, but systematically on all UK financial sector institutions, including accountancy, audit firms and any firms carrying out investment business under the Financial Services Act 1986, to report all suspicious transactions to the police or Customs and Excise. The National Criminal Intelligence Service will then pass on those reports to the appropriate law enforcement agency for investigation.

Two further legislative strands also add to the prevention of money laundering: first, the powers of Customs to seize at the border cash that represents the

[Mr. Phillip Oppenheim]

proceeds of drug trafficking, or which is intended for use in drug trafficking; secondly, the powers now available to the courts to freeze the assets of suspected or convicted criminals which are the proceeds of crime, money laundering or other offences, and to confiscate them on conviction.

I do not want to minimise the strength of the case outlined by the hon. Gentleman or his role in pursuing it. He is right to raise the issues involved. However, unless he can produce further substantiated evidence that the SFO or the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales can investigate, it does not strike me that there is any cause for a Government inquiry. I should like to emphasise the extent to which the Government have significantly enhanced the laws against money laundering in the past few years through the Criminal Justice Act 1993 and other measures.

Sitting suspended, pursuant to Order [7 May], till One o'clock.

Disabled People (Transport)

On resuming—

1 pm

Mr. Hartley Booth (Finchley): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the subject of disablement and travel. I shall outline the problem in relation to three areas: the use of taxis and minicabs by people with guide dogs, the use of cars by disabled people, and the use of trains by disabled people.

The problem of disablement affects one person in 10. Therefore, one person in 10 finds conventional public transport difficult or impossible. Approximately 6.2 million people are disabled in this country, and almost half face major difficulties in the use of public transport. This is a huge problem, as has been recognised by hon. Members in a number of debates, and in legislation last year.

I have raised this matter again today because I have come across a number of issues that I hope the Minister for Railways and Roads will deal with. It is difficult to define the problems, but it is important to do so.

Without transport, people who are disabled are effectively imprisoned; with transport, they have freedom. Without transport, people who are disabled suffer a loss of self-esteem; with transport, they can become active citizens. Without transport, people who are disabled often suffer from clinical depression and isolation; with transport, they demonstrably have better health. Without transport, people who are disabled are a cost to the public because services are sent to individual homes; with transport, they can visit doctors and others who help them.

I owe thanks to a number of people: Scope, the Automobile Association, British Rail, Motability, Guide Dogs for the Blind and a number of constituents, including, Angus McKenzie, Godfrey Faulkner, and also Bill Buchanan. Guide Dogs for the Blind is 65 years old this year, and, rather than retiring, it is going from strength to strength. It has trained 17,600 dogs—it is currently training 800 dogs a year, and that number is rising. I remind hon. Members that it costs £25,500 to train a guide dog.

One would think that guide dogs—which are valuable and essential for disabled people—would be allowed into taxis and minicabs. However, there is overwhelming evidence that minicab and taxi drivers often refuse to let blind or partially sighted people accompanied by dogs into their vehicles. That is a scandal, and it is nonsense. The dogs are trained to sit on the floor. Some taxi drivers fear that a few dog hairs will appear on their seats, which is erroneous.

Mr. Faulkner has said that he has frequently had to wait for two and a half hours for a minicab because others have refused to come to him. Mr. McKenzie several times waited in the rain for 20 minutes for a taxi, and when it arrived, it left again because he had a dog. This is scandalous, and Parliament should rectify it.

The people involved describe the hurt, the annoyance and the inconvenience of this situation. I hope that the Minister will say that the existing legislation will be brought into force to ensure that taxi drivers cannot refuse to take dogs—I refer to section 37 of the Disability Discrimination Act—and that minicabs will also be covered by the legislation.

It is not sufficient for the Minister to say that blind and sight-impaired people can phone for a taxi, which is an argument put by some people. It is not enough, because minicabs are half the price. In addition, taxi drivers often will not go to houses that do not have an account—how does one have an account if one is poor? The legislation must be extended to cover minicabs, and quickly. It will be a test of the good faith of the Government—I believe that they are well motivated and have good faith in this area. It will be a good test to see how they respond. I shall leave this to the Minister and refer to other forms of transport.

I commend dial-a-ride, which is a brilliant scheme that is active in Finchley. I commend Motability, which has provided 500,000 people with cars. It was formed under a royal charter in 1977, and it is still going strong. It receives Government money—a few years ago, it received £3 million a year and it now receives approximately £5 million a year. AA ShopMobility provides wheelchairs, scooters, walking aids and aids in shops.

The orange badge scheme—an excellent scheme—enables disabled people to park in places that they otherwise would not have access to. That scheme, introduced by Government legislation, is inadequate in London, because it does not cover Westminster, the City of London and Chelsea—it covers outer boroughs.

Despite adjustments in medical arrangements for our hospitals, there is a great concentration of hospitals in central London. It is perfectly obvious that disabled people need to visit central London hospitals regularly. However, this is precisely where the orange badge scheme—which would allow them to park near the hospitals—does not apply.

I call on the Minister to say that the orange badge scheme—or a similar scheme—will allow people to park outside these important hospitals. Many of my constituents have complained about, and have been horrified by, not being allowed to park near these hospitals. Indeed, one person was given a huge parking ticket and had no alternative but to borrow money to pay the fine.

The Government have a proud record on trains. The adviser to the board of British Rail has said that we are second to none in Europe in the adaptation of trains. That view is confirmed by many others.

Mr. Chirac is speaking in the other place at present. If he were physically disabled and had travelled from Gare du Nord to Waterloo, he would have discovered that, although there are facilities for the disabled at Waterloo, there are none at Gare du Nord. France and Belgium have copied our ideas for adapting train carriages to meet the needs of the disabled. The industry has earned some credit points in that area, and I give praise where it is due. Some 98 per cent. of our train network is equipped to carry people in wheelchairs. Disabled facilities at train stations, car parks and eateries are improving.

Nevertheless, many of the 2,600 railway stations up and down the country—particularly those that are unmanned—remain inaccessible to disabled people in wheelchairs. I call on the Government—and upon my hon. Friend the Minister, who is responsible for railway policy—to deal with that problem.

For instance, I ask that the Anglia Railway proposal to install an on-board ramp on local trains for use at all unmanned stations be extended nationally. Even with privatisation, I know that there are ways in which the Department of Transport can disseminate information about best practice, and embarrass companies into making further improvements. Conservative Members will understand that it is in interests of those companies to gain a good reputation when they are competing in a free market.

I call on the Government to examine the rail system and to use their best endeavours to ensure that trains—particularly those calling at unmanned stations—are accessible to disabled people. My constituent, Mr. Faulkner, has conducted a complete survey of London Underground stations, and has found that many are inaccessible to blind people. I had difficulty meeting someone at Westminster tube station his morning—although I appreciate that work is going on there at present.

I commend the good work that has been done in this area, but I come to the House with a shopping list—as you might expect, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have raised three important points: I ask that guide dogs and their disabled owners be allowed proper and immediate access to both taxis and minicabs; that disabled parking facilities be provided for those visiting hospitals in central London; and that there be improved access for blind people to unmanned British Rail and London Underground stations.

1.11 pm

The Minister for Railways and Roads (Mr. John Watts): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley (Mr. Booth) on again bringing this important issue before the House. As he acknowledged, in the past 10 to 15 years significant progress has been made towards improving the accessibility of our transport systems. The achievements of recent years in that field were due in large part to a process which began back in the early 1980s, with research to give us a basic understanding of the needs of elderly and disabled people as public transport users.

We moved next to demonstration projects to evaluate improvements and to raise awareness of the possibilities before drawing up codes of practice and guidance for manufacturers and operators. Most recently, through the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, we have passed comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation which will, for the first time, provide a legal framework within which further improvements, leading to full accessibility of all public transport systems and infrastructure, may be required.

Before I outline some of the developments in public transport services—which I know will be of interest to my hon. Friend and to the House—I shall respond to some of the specific points on my hon. Friend's shopping list.

Taxis are of course a vital transport link, providing a 24-hour service all year round. We have required new models of the purpose-built taxi to be wheelchair-accessible for some time. We are also beginning to see the introduction of other vehicles that have been adapted to transport a passenger travelling in a wheelchair.

Under the terms of the Disability Discrimination Act, we will introduce a requirement for all taxis to be able to carry disabled people, including those who use wheelchairs. We will set technical performance specifications which will allow a range of vehicle types to enter the market. That will allow operators and the licensing authorities to make a choice to suit their particular operating conditions.

[Mr. John Watts]

Another particularly important measure that we will bring forward under the Act is a requirement that taxi drivers do not refuse to carry guide dogs or hearing dogs. That provision is not dependent upon the introduction of new vehicle standards, and we intend to consult on the relevant regulations this summer, with a view to bringing them into effect later this year.

I appreciate that those provisions will not tackle the discrimination that my hon. Friend mentioned in relation to minicabs. We cannot tackle that problem until there is legislation requiring minicabs in London to be licensed. However, we have already made it clear that, when a suitable opportunity arises, we shall bring forward legislation regarding the licensing of minicabs. Discrimination against guide dog owners may be considered in that context.

In the meantime, I endorse my hon. Friend's comments, and remind drivers and operators of both taxis and minicabs that guide dogs are highly trained animals and can be accommodated in current vehicles, whether purpose-built or saloon vehicles, without causing a nuisance. I know that many drivers are concerned that the dogs will leave the seats covered in hair. However, as my hon. Friend said, guide dogs are trained to sit not on car seats but in footwells. They are likely to be better behaved than some passengers that taxis and minicabs carry in the course of their usual business.

Ensuring that disabled people have access to mainstream public transport is a major priority for us. That does not mean that the need for accessible specialised services, such as the dial-a-ride service mentioned by my hon. Friend, will diminish. No matter how accessible mainstream services become, some people will remain reliant on door-to-door services for some or all of their mobility.

Those services also have the potential to link in to mainstream services—for example, by providing transport links to main interchanges. In short, their role will change over the coming years to provide a complementary service to accessible public transport rather than providing a substitute for accessible transport as has occurred in the past. None the less, they will continue to play a vital role.

The private car is also important to disabled people's mobility. The Department's mobility advice and vehicle information service—MAVIS—and other independent assessment centres across the country provide advice and assessment on cars and driving to disabled people, both as drivers and as passengers.

My hon. Friend mentioned the important issue of the provision of parking for those who rely on the private car for independent mobility. I note my hon. Friend's point about parking spaces for orange badge holders in central London. The Department has worked with the four authorities involved for several years. Some progress has been made, but I will ask officials to take the concerns raised by my hon. Friend in the debate to the working party's next meeting so that they may be considered.

Turning to rail services, there is no doubt that the provision for disabled people has been greatly improved over recent years, thanks to the policy commitment of the British Railways Board and the hard work of its Advisory Committee on Disability. The Railways Act 1993 introduced a requirement for all train and station operators to have regard to the needs of disabled people. That duty is policed by the rail regulator. In advance of that legislation, all InterCity services are fully accessible, and all newer rolling stock on those services incorporates a wheelchair-accessible toilet. New rolling stock elsewhere on the system is also providing wheelchair access, and incorporates other features to make it easier to use for people with mobility difficulties. Again, those developments will provide a solid foundation on which to take forward the requirements under the Disability Discrimination Act.

Access to railway stations is also important. It is no good people being able to get on to the rolling stock if they cannot reach the platform in the first place. In main line terminals in London and other major cities, again, we have a heritage of fine old buildings that were constructed in the days when access by disabled people was not considered an issue. Throughout the country, there are about 2,500 stations, in both urban and rural areas, where access from one side of the track to the other is possible only by means of a footbridge or an underpass.

As with the vehicles themselves, we have for some years had full access to all main line and InterCity stations—and that includes not only wheelchair access but, again, a wide range of facilities and services for people with impaired vision, impaired hearing and other mobility problems—but access to many other stations throughout the network remains patchy.

At some, it has been possible to install lifts to enable people to cross the track by means of the footbridge or underpass. At others, a road bridge provides a relatively easy and adjacent route between the two. Where neither of those is possible, the solution has generally been to encourage disabled people to use the next station where access is easier, but that is not always convenient.

Under the terms of our new legislation, there will be a requirement for all stations to be made fully accessible, although that will involve a "test of reasonableness". Of course, full access would be expected to be built in where reconstruction or major refurbishment is taking place.

One of the biggest problems in accessibility of main line rail transport is the gap between the platform and the train. Over many years, British Rail has used a portable ramp that is kept on station platforms and is simply wheeled to the door of the carriage in which the disabled person is travelling. Although that works relatively well, it depends on communication between the stations of departure and arrival, and the competence of the staff involved in both cases.

Increasingly, we would expect a range of access options to be developed, including both lift and ramp systems on the train itself rather than on the station. With a growing number of unstaffed stations, solutions that are incorporated in the train are becoming more and more important. As my hon. Friend mentioned, in some parts of East Anglia, for example, a portable ramp that is carried on the train is being used successfully by the train operating staff, where no one is available on the station. Such solutions will become more widespread once the requirements of the Act come into force, but I am pleased that train operators are taking action of their own volition, before being required to do so by legislation.

New systems offer a unique opportunity to build in full access from the design stage. The new rapid transit systems, for example, which have in the past 15 years been built in some cities, including London, have all been designed and built with full access to wheelchair users and other disabled people.

As with new vehicle systems, where it has been possible to build a completely new facility, the advantages of designing for everyone can be seen. My hon. Friend mentioned the London terminal for the channel tunnel at Waterloo as an example. From its earliest design stages, that was built with the advice and guidance of disabled people. The result is a station that is easy to use for people with a range of mobility difficulties, and, as a result, for all other passengers who may be travelling with heavy luggage or with small children, or who may be confused simply by an unfamiliar environment. Where we design in facilities that are convenient for disabled people, we bring benefits to all the travelling public. We should always bear that in mind.

Older systems such as the London underground face problems similar to those of heavy rail systems. It may simply be uneconomic to achieve full accessibility, although significant improvement may be possible.

The approach that London Underground has taken and that the Government support is, as I have described, that, wherever new stations are built or major refurbishment is undertaken, full accessibility will be incorporated, although it may be many years before the entire system can be fully accessible. Even when the provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act come into effect, it will be subject—in the case of infrastructure such as the London underground—to the "test of reasonableness".

That means that there will be a financial limit on expenditure that the service provider is obliged to incur. The positive, but pragmatic, programme of improvement that London Underground has adopted over recent years is likely to be continued, so that there is a gradual rather than a dramatic pace of change.

Although the major difficulty of achieving full wheelchair access will remain with us for years, there is no excuse for failure to improve the system for the large number of people who have impaired vision and other mobility difficulties. Great emphasis has been placed, through guidance and codes of practice, based on research, on issues such as the use of colour contrast, guidance paths, audible announcements and other relatively straightforward and relatively low-cost items.

Information has a vital role to play in enabling disabled people to benefit from improved services. Good practice in that area is being established. For example, for some years London Underground has had a large print map of the underground system, and an audio cassette description of it.

Ninety per cent. of new buses have at least some of the features recommended by the Department's statutory advisers, the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee, in its recommended specification. That document sets out a series of simple, low-cost improvements, such as better handholds, improved lighting levels and bellpushes that can be reached from a sitting position. Those features, which greatly assist ambulant disabled people, will be the foundation for the regulations that we will introduce under the Disability Discrimination Act.

The regulations will also deal with wheelchair users' needs. In common with many other countries throughout Europe, we are part of the low-floor bus revolution. We already have several hundred low-floor, fully accessible buses in service, ahead of any legislative requirement. The advantages of low-floor technology for full-size single deck buses is well established. Again, the benefits to all passengers, not just those who are elderly or disabled, is well documented and self-evident. Low-floor double deck buses and minibuses will be in production soon.

Under the Disability Discrimination Act, we will not be making it a requirement for operators to use low-floor technology. We are planning to introduce a technical performance specification that will provide a choice for operators, although guaranteeing full access for disabled passengers.

Access to coaches presents particular challenges for the industry. Further research is being conducted to find a solution that is effective and that would not result in an unacceptable loss of seating.

Access to the vehicles themselves is only part of the solution to creating a fully accessible transport chain. For accessibility to be compatible throughout the country, and to ensure that it does not vary from town to town or region to region, we have established national guidelines for the pedestrian environment, including the use of tactile surfaces.

It is crucial for a person with impaired vision to know that, when he encounters a particular surface, wherever it might be, it will give him one clear message. The same philosophy has been adopted at transport terminals such as railway and bus stations. Here, too, clear guidance to operators, developed on the basis of research over a number of years, has meant that the same type of tactile surface, the same use of colour contrast and so on, can be found in facilities throughout the country.

We still have a long way to go before we can say with confidence that we have created a fully accessible transport system within a barrier-free pedestrian environment. What we have done over the past 10 years is to build up the necessary knowledge on which to create that system and that environment. We now have to apply it universally and systematically. We know that we cannot do that overnight, but we believe that we can achieve it.

The guidance and codes of practice and general raising of awareness on which we have concentrated over the past decade have provided a strong framework on which the new legislation can build. Most important, even though we are still quite a number of years away from achieving good levels of accessibility in some systems—such as the London underground—we can be sure that no more vehicles will be built or systems developed that, in their design, revert to the old practice of excluding, rather than including, disabled and elderly people.

Although there is no reason for complacency about the degree of achievement that we have under our belts, significant progress has been made, and we have firm plans, including those provided by a new legislative framework, which will ensure that progress is built on and that we move towards the goal of public transport services that are accessible to all people. In meeting disabled people's needs, we will be serving all passengers' interests.

Crofting Communities

1.29 pm

Mr. Calum Macdonald (Western Isles): I am very grateful for the opportunity to raise this topic, which is important not only to my constituency but to the whole of the highlands and islands. The Under–Secretary of State for Scotland, the hon. Member for Aberdeen, South (Mr. Robertson), will know that, when I originally asked for the debate, the issue of most worry to the crofting communities was Government proposals to change a couple of major schemes that are important to crofting.

On Monday, in the Scottish Grand Committee, the Secretary of State for Scotland announced that he had decided not to go ahead with the proposed changes. The Government's change of heart has been widely welcomed throughout the crofting communities. I acknowledge the Secretary of State's decision, and pay tribute to the campaign of the Scottish Crofters Union, which proved so effective in changing the Government's mind.

Happily, that does not mean that there is nothing to talk about today. I should like to use this half hour to discuss a couple of issues of equal concern to the crofting communities. One is a relatively long-standing concern: the general question of financial support of crofting communities. The other is a growing concern that ought to concern the Government as well: the enormous increase in the paperwork and form-filling with which crofters have to cope as a result of new Government schemes and regulations.

Before addressing those topics, I should like to ask for clarification of the statement made on Monday in the Scottish Grand Committee, when the Secretary of State said that there would be no changes to either the housing scheme or the agricultural grants scheme. Will the Minister confirm that that means that there will be no changes whatever in the scope of the agricultural grants scheme, and that all the projects relevant to that scheme will continue to be relevant in future?

I turn to the social and environmental benefits of crofting, and the need for them to be better recognised in the Government's policy. Total support for agriculture in Britain amounts to £2.75 billion—a staggering figure. The support that goes to crofting, however, is obviously only a fraction of that. Under the common agricultural policy, as is well known, 80 per cent. of support goes to the 20 per cent. of farmers with the biggest farms. Unfortunately, the MacSharry reforms have had very little impact on correcting that imbalance. Far too much support continues to go to huge agricultural businesses that provide very little benefit either for the environment or for the communities in which they are situated.

There are 10,000 active crofters in the highlands today. The average croft is about five hectares. There is very little arable farming, obviously because of the nature of the land, and most crofters concentrate on livestock—predominantly sheep. A crofter's average flock is about 60 ewes. It is important to emphasise that that is not the minimum but the average, and is obviously very small. That is why the average amount received by each crofter in CAP support attached to livestock, which is the major proportion of the support that they receive, is about £1,500.

It is useful to compare the 10,000 crofters in the highlands, who receive on average £1,500 each, with the 4,000 biggest farmers in England, each of whom receives more than £50,000, and 13 of whom receive up to £500,000—some more than that—in Government subsidy. From that comparison, one realises that the image of featherbedded crofters is far removed from reality.

Government support is essential to sustain crofting. By definition, crofting is small-scale and part-time, takes place on land that is very difficult to work—it has among the most extreme climatic conditions in Europe—and by itself produces very little income. Government support will continue to be essential to its survival.

The benefits produced by crofting are enormous. The environment benefits greatly. It is no accident that the crofts in my constituency, for example, are the last refuge of the corncrake in Britain. The crofting counties in general are regarded as one of Europe's most important regions of environmental diversity.

Just as important as the environmental benefits is the fact that crofting sustains rural communities in marginal areas as no single Government policy possibly could, or as any other agricultural support system has managed in any other part of the United Kingdom. Crofting has been absolutely essential to the stabilisation of the population in remote island areas—and, indeed, to the revival of and increase in the population in the highlands and islands as a whole. Crofting manages to sustain rural communities, because it gives families a working stake in the land.

That case used to be difficult to make when the sole objective of Government agricultural policy was simply to produce the maximum amount of food. When production was the overriding goal, crofting was obviously regarded as pretty much marginal to it. Today, however, priorities are completely different. The concern is no longer about producing vast quantities of food but about producing high-quality, safe food. There are concerns about safeguarding and enhancing the environment, and about sustaining and nurturing viable rural communities. In all those aspects, crofting is clearly in line with the new social and environmental goals behind agricultural policy.

Unfortunately, crofting is still stuck with the financial support policies of the past. There is precious little recognition in the CAP—even after the latest set of reforms—of the social and environmental goals to which rural policy should be directed and which the public clearly demand as a return for the taxpayers' money that goes into agricultural support. There have been some changes in policy, but not nearly enough. The overwhelming bulk of the £2.75 billion that will be spent on agriculture this year is still not properly connected to the wider social and environmental goals.

It is important to remember that very few support schemes are specific to crofting. Most of the support for crofting is part of the general agricultural support schemes that apply throughout the United Kingdom and the European Union under the CAP. By far the most significant is the sheep payments, for which every sheep farmer in Europe is eligible. Some elements are targeted, but they are very small and not very well targeted.

The less-favoured area supplement provides an addition to the basic sheep payment paid to sheep farmers throughout Europe, but, since 94 per cent. of Scotland is classified as a less-favoured area, the supplement is a broad-brush approach that does not take any account of the particular circumstances of the crofting environment.

There is, additionally, the hill livestock compensatory allowance, by which more than 90 per cent. of Scotland is covered. But that allowance is paid out on pretty much the same basis as the less-favoured area supplement, and again, no attention is paid to the specific difficulties faced by crofters.

The only livestock payment specific to crofters is the small payment of 64p extra per sheep, and the highlands and islands additional payment, which is a similar payment for cattle in the highlands and islands. The difference that those payments make is very marginal. Moreover, the average flock owned by crofters is only 60 ewes. The average specific payment to crofters is therefore less than £40, which makes hardly any difference.

What should the Government be doing? It is obvious that agricultural support needs to be better targeted, and an important way in which to accomplish that would be for the Government to respond to the frequent demands that they increase the highland and islands supplement to livestock payments.

I should like to suggest to the Minister another, new way forward, which I hope that he will pass on to Lord Lindsay for consideration. The European Community has introduced two other designations in its common agricultural policy and rural policy: the mountain area designation, and the sparsely populated area designation. Those complement its long-standing category of less-favoured area.

Mountain areas have been so designated in France, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Italy and across Europe, except in the British isles. As the highlands is one of the most remote, climatically hostile and famous mountain areas in Europe, that fact is bizarre. The Government should apply immediately to the European Commission to have the highlands designated as a mountain area, so that it can become eligible for the additional CAP supplements funded by the EC and available with such a designation.

The situation is the same in relation to the new sparsely populated area designation, which was introduced with the accession of the Nordic countries to the European Union. Most of Finland and much of Sweden are now designated as sparsely populated areas. The highlands and islands—particularly if one removes Inverness—should be so designated. I ask the Minister to push the case for that with the EC.

The need for better targeting in general goes to the heart of the CAP, which will be debated later today and tomorrow in the House. The Government could make an important start on that if they respond to those two suggestions.

The other big problem facing crofters is the rising tide of paperwork and bureaucracy, which has increased enormously over the past five years and now threatens to overwhelm many crofters. I have been receiving an increasing number of complaints about that issue from crofters. The Government should also be concerned about it because, if the crofters are facing an increasing tide of paperwork, civil servants must be doing more work in Government offices, which means costs to the Government that they should be trying to reduce.

I receive most complaints about the integrated administrative and control system forms that have to be filled in each year. That form is a full 18 pages long, and every crofter must fill it in to be eligible for any of the agricultural support schemes. It arrives at the crofter's door with a 37-page booklet explaining how to fill it in.

Farmers across the country have to fill in the IACS form, but most of those work full-time on their farms and are therefore prepared to take on the extra administrative burden, even if they are not particularly happy about it. However, the motivation for a crofter—who is a part-time farmer receiving very little income from his croft—is quite different. The growing amount of paperwork is extremely discouraging for a part-time farmer, and many crofters are now wondering whether it is worth their while.

The IACS form is by far the biggest bureaucratic burden, but it is not the final one. Other forms have to be filled in to receive livestock subsidy for sheep or for cattle. Another form must be filled in if there are changes in reserve quota. New forms must now be filled in whenever sheep are moved between holdings that belong to different owners. That might be only a matter of wintering sheep. If a crofter moves a couple of dozen sheep from one holding to another, a form must be filled in.

Other certificates must be completed for animals travelling more than 31 miles, which is not far when one thinks of distances in the highland and islands. Moreover, there will inevitably be more form-filling as the Government pursue solutions to the BSE crisis. An endless ocean of forms and paperwork is drowning crofters and removing the incentive and commitment that they have and must have to continue crofting.

The fear is not only theoretical but has very real consequences, which is evident in the way in which environmentally sensitive areas have been designated in the Uists in my constituency. Every year the paperwork for qualifying for grant aid under the ESA schemes has become increasingly onerous. To be eligible, each crofter must first make his way through a 27-page booklet. He must then fill in an 11-page application form, and then produce a management plan for his croft that looks as far ahead as five years.

Such a burden is simply absurd when dealing with crofts that are only five to 10 hectares and receive payments of only a few hundred pounds under such schemes. It also contrasts vividly with the situation in such places as Eigg and Knoydart, where someone can come in and buy out entire estates without even telling anyone who they are, far less having to fill in a five-year development plan or produce an environmental prospectus.

Participation in the ESA scheme has collapsed from 280 crofters in the first year to only 30 this year because of the form-filling required. Paperwork is clearly strangling an excellent idea to provide payments for crofters to farm in ways that specifically benefit the environment.

What has happened in the ESA scheme will happen throughout crofting areas if the tide of paperwork is not halted and reversed. That is why I asked the Scottish Office to include in the review of the administrative costs of operating the scheme in relation to crofting, which was announced on Monday, the administrative costs of all the other programmes for which crofters are eligible. As I said, that is also a problem for the Government if they want to cut bureaucracy and administration.

I have made a couple of specific suggestions to the Minister. I do not expect him to give a detailed reply now. I should, indeed, hope that he will not give an off-the-cuff reply. I hope that he will take away the suggestions, discuss them with his colleagues and perhaps respond to me in writing, so that they can be pursued.

1.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Raymond S. Robertson): I congratulate the hon. Member for Western Isles (Mr. Macdonald) on securing the Adjournment debate. As he said, when he did so he was not to know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State intended to make a series of announcements about crofting at the sitting of the Scottish Grand Committee at Dundee on Monday. I hope that he accepts that it is therefore inevitable that my reply on behalf of the Government must cover much of the same ground as Monday's debate.

As the hon. Gentleman said, both debates were stimulated by the concerns of crofting interests that our proposals for merging the long-standing crofting counties agricultural grants scheme—CCAGS—into the new proposed Scottish countryside premium scheme would work to the disadvantage of crofters. As my right hon. Friend made clear on Monday, that was certainly never our intention.

Indeed, as my noble Friend Lord Lindsay, the Minister responsible for agriculture in Scotland, explained at the launch of the consultation paper in early March, our aim was to

"provide the best of all the old with the best of the new"

by proposing that crofters would be able to apply for assistance towards a wide range of capital works, plus a range of conservation management payments not available outside of designated environmentally sensitive areas. Nevertheless, we have listened carefully to what has been said, and I am pleased to note that the hon. Member for Western Isles accepts the reassurances that my right hon. Friend gave in Dundee.

I remind hon. Members that my right hon. Friend has decided to continue to offer CCAGS separately from the new scheme which, as a result, will no longer provide assistance for crofters towards a range of capital items not available to other applicants. Instead, assistance for those items of work will continue to be provided through CCAGS, as at present. I can give the hon. Gentleman the reassurance he sought, that we are planning no changes to the scope of the scheme. Like all Government schemes, however, it will be under constant review.

Eligible crofters will be able to take advantage of other aspects of the proposed countryside premium scheme. For example, they will be able to apply for the various environmental management payments, which will now be available on a much wider basis than hitherto. I know that crofting interests, particularly the Scottish Crofters Union, which has published various joint documents with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, have been pressing for that for some time.

Fears had also been expressed that we were planning to make changes to the crofters' building grants and loans scheme—CBGLS—and, in particular, that we might discontinue loan assistance. We certainly discussed a proposal along those lines with crofting interests earlier this year, and it would have had the very substantial advantage that we could use the resources to increase the rates of grant assistance paid through the scheme. However, again, we listened to the concerns expressed, and we have decided not to progress that proposal further at the present time.

I should also like to emphasise that we have no specific plans for a means test. Although there is no doubt that linking assistance to income in some way might help to improve the targeting of the scheme, we are not persuaded, and at the present time the benefits would be outweighed by the extra administrative cost for the Department and the burden on the applicant.

I can only repeat again that we are in no doubt that the schemes provide an important contribution to the support of crofting communities. For example, the best estimates we have suggest that some 75 per cent. of the 8,000 or so crofters working crofts, plus a further 1,500 occupiers of non-croft holdings in the crofting counties, have used the CCAGS in the past five years or so.

Similarly, in relation to the crofter housing scheme, CBGLS, an evaluation we commissioned in 1993 from Pieda, a firm of economic consultants, estimated that more than 3,200 households received assistance in the 10 years between 1981 and 1991, and that it had played a significant role in retaining households in crofting.

There has never been any question of discontinuing assistance for crofting agriculture or crofter housing. Our aim was simply to ensure that crofting communities and the taxpayer, who foots the bill at the end of the day, secure the best possible value for money for each £1 of public money spent. We therefore have a duty to consider possible changes that might lead to improvements, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will respect that. He has come up with some ideas, and I assure him that they will be properly considered by Lord Lindsay, who will write to him about the specific matters he mentioned.

The topic for today's debate, however, is Government support for crofting communities, and that goes well beyond the two specific schemes to which I have already referred. The reality is that the list of types and forms of support is extremely long. That is right and proper, because crofting communities are found in the remotest corners of Britain, and the natural resources available to those communities are often limited.

However, it is not all a question of economic and social disadvantage. Crofting communities have many strengths including a strong sense of community, a distinctive culture—Gaelic in the Western Isles and Nordic in Orkney and Shetland—and an outstanding natural heritage. It is important that Government support for crofting helps to build upon those strengths.

The Crofters Commission plays a key role in relation to crofting tenure, and the Government support it to the tune of approximately £1.5 million per year. Much of its work is very much out of the public eye, but it nevertheless provides the cornerstone for crofting.

The Crofters Commission is to be congratulated on the way in which it has sought, in recent years, to use its powers positively to support crofting communities—for example, by seeking to tackle the problems of absenteeism, and by developing effective channels of communication with crofting areas.

The commission has also co-operated closely with other agencies to develop new and innovative initiatives such as the croft entrant schemes and the recent crofting township development scheme. In co-operation with the Forestry Authority, it has also helped to promote crofter forestry—a development which I know is close to the heart of the hon. Gentleman, who successfully piloted through the House the Crofter Forestry (Scotland) Act 1991.

It goes without saying that progress on those initiatives has been possible only with Government financial support. Beyond the work of the Crofters Commission and

the specific crofting schemes administered by the Department or the commission, there are many other forms of support.

As my right hon. Friend, who has joined us, pointed out on Monday, all crofters with agricultural businesses are potentially eligible for the normal range of agricultural subsidies. For crofters, the most relevant are the various livestock subsidies for hill sheep and cattle—the hill livestock compensatory allowances, including the highlands and islands supplement, and the sheep and suckler cow premiums. Within the less-favoured areas in Scotland, those subsidies amounted to some £220 million in 1995, and crofters will have benefited from an important share of that money.

Under the Government, crofters and crofting communities have also benefited from a wide range of area-specific development programmes designed to help to strengthen agriculture in some of our most fragile areas, and also to encourage the development of alternative sources of employment.

Those programmes have included the integrated development programme for the Western Isles, which spent some £25 million between 1982 and 1987; the agriculture development programme for the Scottish islands, excluding the Western Isles, which spent just over £30 million between 1988 and 1993; the rural enterprise programme, with expenditure of almost £13 million; and, most recently, the objective 1 programme, which will result in public expenditure of about £500 million in the highlands and islands from 1994 to 1999.

Expenditure under the objective 1 programme is intended to help develop all sectors of the highlands and islands economy, including some of particular importance to crofters, such as aquaculture, tourism and the service industry. Furthermore, the selection process for individual projects is designed to ensure that priority is given to those that will benefit the most remote and fragile parts of the highlands and islands—some of the areas where the crofting tradition is strongest.

Crofting communities also benefit indirectly from a range of other programmes, extending from the substantial funding provided for Gaelic organisations, Gaelic broadcasting and Gaelic education, to the subsidies provided for ferry services to the various islands of Scotland on which so many of our crofters live.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): The hon. Member for Western Isles (Mr. Macdonald) mentioned land ownership, and referred in particular to Eigg and Knoydart. What is the Government's view of those absentee landlords, who have treated people with contempt? One may talk about hill livestock compensatory allowances, but what happens when the cattle are sold from people's islands?

Mr. Robertson: I am sure that the hon. Lady will agree that crofting is limited on Knoydart. Perhaps she is trying to take me down a road along which I would rather not go during a debate on crofting.

I reiterate that the Government are fully committed to supporting crofting, and they stand on their record. The steady regeneration of the highlands and islands in the 1980s and 1990s has been one of the unsung success stories of the Government's policies, and it has been reflected in increased population and economic activity. That has helped to give increased confidence to crofting communities, which is manifest in recent developments such as the crofting trusts at Assynt, and at Borve and Annishadder on Skye.

It would be quite wrong, however, simply to allow policies and programmes to fossilise. The Government are willing to introduce changes if and when they are required, and to explore new ways of providing support. But we are also willing to listen to what the crofters have to say. In relation to crofting, our commitment and our approach is amply demonstrated in my right hon Friend's initiative on crofting trusts.

We want crofters to be increasingly responsible for shaping their own destinies, rather than have their affairs managed for them by others. Our aim is to give them the necessary support to achieve that.

It being two minutes to Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Sitting suspended, pursuant to Standing Order No. 10 (Wednesday sittings), till half-past Two o'clock.

Oral Answers to Questions

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

British Energy (Privatisation)

1. **Mr. Eric Clarke:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on progress towards the privatisation of British Energy. [28355]

7. **Mr. Foulkes:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on progress towards the privatisation of British Energy. [28362]

The President of the Board of Trade and Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Ian Lang): Privatisation of British Energy remains on track for July.

Mr. Clarke: Now that the Government have admitted that there is a £3.8 billion cost liability for the Magnox stations, which is causing a £1 billion shortfall in the sale of British Energy, is it not time that the privatisation was stopped because it is a raw deal for the taxpayer and a shady deal for shareholders?

Mr. Lang: It is typical of the Labour party that, while it claims that it is no longer against privatisation, it has opposed, and continues to oppose, every privatisation. The Magnox stations are not being privatised and their liabilities will remain with the Government. The liabilities of the non-Magnox stations will pass with the assets into British Energy and will be privatised. That is an entirely proper and sensible procedure that will generate substantial funds for the benefit of the taxpayer.

Mr. Foulkes: Is not the truth that the Secretary of State has no strategy for energy but is lurching from one decision to another? Will he admit that the sale of British Energy is likely to be postponed by a second inquiry by the Monopolies and Mergers Commission? Since, as my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Mr. Clarke) said, it is a bad deal for the taxpayer and a bad risk for the shareholders, will he agree that the privatisation should not go ahead and call it off now?

Mr. Lang: No, I have no intention of calling it off. As I said in response to the initial question, privatisation of British Energy remains on track for July. The nuclear industry has improved beyond measure in recent years. Nuclear Electric's output has increased by 39 per cent. and Scottish Nuclear's output by 38 per cent. Sizewell B has been constructed on budget and on time and will reach full load in July. The nuclear industry is doing well and will do even better in the private sector.

Mr. Dover: Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State confirm that the biggest advantage of privatisation is that the risks and opposing investment priorities disappear? The private investor, or shareholder, will take the risk. We shall ensure that the nuclear industry goes forward rather than backward and ends up paying a lot of corporation tax into the Exchequer.

Mr. Lang: My hon. Friend is right. Before the Government's various privatisations, the nationalised industries were costing the country £50 million a week. They are now generating very much more than that in revenue to the Exchequer. Nuclear Energy, once it is privatised, will help to contribute to that by raising substantial proceeds for the taxpayer, and, by making its own investment decisions in future, it will become even more competitive and productive than was suggested by the figures that I gave earlier.

Mrs. Beckett: Surely the Secretary of State and his colleagues should ensure that people who might buy shares in British Energy are properly warned of the scale of the risk that they are undertaking. The hon. Member for Chorley (Mr. Dover) talked about the risks and liabilities disappearing. They are not disappearing. If the Government stick to their word for once, they will be transferred to private shareholders. Will he confirm that, against liabilities stated by British Energy to be set at an undiscounted figure of £14.6 billion, the only special provision being made is a fund of £16 million a year? Is that not another example of the Government's incompetence and neglect—even of the interests of shareholders?

Mr. Lang: I think that the hon. Lady is getting a little muddled. The liabilities pass with the assets to British Energy. On privatisation, British Energy will make an initial endowment to the segregated fund of £228 million and, thereafter, will make contributions, which will initially be at £16 million a year. That is the result of careful calculation of the appropriate figure necessary to meet on-going liabilities. It will enable British Energy, the nuclear industry, to be privatised. All the details will be set out appropriately in the prospectus. It is typical that the Opposition try to talk down such privatisations and try to undermine flotations, and are thus operating against the interests of the British taxpayer.

Social Chapter

2. **Mr. David Atkinson:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment he has made of the effect of adherence to the social chapter on the hotel and guesthouse sector. [28356]

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Mr. John M. Taylor): Embracing the social chapter would seriously damage competitiveness and employment in all sectors of industry because it would allow the United Kingdom to be out-voted on measures imposing unnecessary burdens and costs on businesses.

Mr. Atkinson: Is my hon. Friend aware of the representations that I have recently received from a major hotel chain in my constituency warning me that a national minimum wage would reduce jobs and training, encourage hotels to get out of tourism altogether in favour of residential redevelopment, and have an altogether devastating effect on the ability of Britain's tourism industry to compete successfully against cheap holidays abroad? Between now and the general election, will my hon. Friend and his colleagues warn against the dire consequences of the Labour and Liberal parties' national minimum wage on one of Britain's most successful industries—tourism?

Mr. Taylor: The two greatest threats to the tourist industry and the hotel trade generally are the social

chapter and the minimum wage. They will get neither from the Conservatives; they will get both from the Opposition. The more that we tell people that, the better.

Mr. Barnes: Why, after 17 years of Conservative Government, cannot we have some basic decent standards in the hotel industry? The Minister's answer is a disgrace. If the Government think that the policies coming from the European Union and the Opposition's minimum wage are incorrect, what is their answer to the problem?

Mr. Taylor: The British tourist industry has some of the highest standards in the world, not least in London, and in the provinces too. The question is what would happen to that excellent tourist industry if Brussels interfered. That would be unnecessary and dangerous. It would upset the successful job-creating balance that we now have in the industry.

Internet

4. **Mr. Batiste:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what steps he is taking to promote the use of the Internet in the United Kingdom. [28359]

Mr. John M. Taylor: My Department is involved in a range of initiatives helping users to gain business benefit from electronic networking, including the Internet.

Mr. Batiste: Can my hon. Friend confirm that it is important to British industry that school leavers should be familiar with the Internet? Can he further confirm that cable companies, such as Bell Cable Media in Leeds, already offer schools free connection to the Internet and, on top of that, a valuable package of services without charge? Does that not demonstrate the utter sham of the sweetheart deal between the Labour party and British Telecom, a deal that undermines competition and gives nothing to the British public?

Mr. Taylor: I completely agree with my hon. Friend about the deceitful sham and I confirm both the points that he made about the excellent promoters of cable, particularly in his constituency. I also confirm that a number of companies are already offering schools free access to the Internet. We do not propose to reverse our consistent policy preventing BT from broadcasting over its existing national network. Yes, the cable companies are doing it free. That should be welcomed.

Mr. Hoon: If the Minister is so keen to promote the use of the Internet, what steps does he propose to take to ensure that all Internet service providers enjoy access to the network on consistent terms and conditions? In particular, does he agree with Oftel's recent consultation document, "Promoting competition in services over telecommunication networks", which says that Internet's services should be reclassified as systems business?

Mr. Taylor: The information society initiative, launched by my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade, is illustrative of the Government's attitude to these fast-moving developments. The Government are not being interventionist—nor should we be—but we are helping new and inexperienced users, such as small firms, and we have expressed our total approval of the developments in schools.

Mr. Waller: What backing is the Department giving to the information society initiative, promoting the use of communications technology? What response have the Government received from industry?

Mr. Taylor: Two pilot schemes are running in Manchester and in Harlow. The Government have committed £35 million in new funding, and we are encouraging smaller users in particular to see the great commercial advantages that are available to them and to their businesses from the Internet. A clear trend is emerging from the Internet. Its commercial application makes it buoyant, and the level of participation will continue to rise.

World Trade Organisation

5. **Mrs. Lait:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on the role and functions of the World Trade Organisation. [28360]

The Minister for Trade (Mr. Anthony Nelson): The World Trade Organisation provides the legal and institutional foundation of the multilateral trading system, providing a framework of obligations governing trade between its members. It is a forum for further development of the multilateral trading system, and provides a mechanism for settling trade disputes.

Mrs. Lait: If the country were not a member of the European Union, would we not have to negotiate the end of the worldwide beef ban at the World Trade Organisation? Would that not take a long time?

Mr. Nelson: My hon. Friend is quite right. The disputes resolution procedure of the WTO is long and uncertain. The Government's efforts to resolve the BSE trade-related issues are directed to persuading our European partners to lift the ban and to have bilateral discussions with third parties to try to ensure that they lift their bans on imports. That must be the quickest and most effective way of resolving the crisis, for which there is no scientific justification. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point.

Mr. Bell: We live in hope that the ban on our beef will be lifted before the WTO holds its first annual meeting in December. May I welcome the Minister for Trade back to the House from his various travels on behalf of our country? According to the gracious homily that appeared in *The Times* on Saturday, he spends one week a month here. We are grateful to have him at the Dispatch Box this week.

In his eloquent speech this morning, President Chirac talked about a social model for Europe. Irrespective of the comments of the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs, would it not be appropriate to have a social model for the WTO? That was left out of the so-called Uruguay round of the GATT negotiations. Would it not be appropriate to have basic levels of employment rights throughout the trading world, regardless of the situation in each trading country?

Mr. Nelson: I am grateful for the kind sentiments expressed by the hon. Gentleman, and for those that

appeared in *The Times*. It is rather nice to read something pleasant for once about a Conservative Minister in that newspaper.

The hon. Gentleman is the shadow spokesman on trade and, presumably, aspires to becoming Trade Minister. Frankly, it is extraordinary for him to talk about importing into the new trade order a social chapter that would be so damaging to this country. Has he learnt nothing from the example that is on our doorstep? The Government's attitude to the issue was clearly spelt out by my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade. Our priorities are to have a successful and liberalising meeting in Singapore, to embark on another trade round and to ensure that we move towards free trade by 2020. That is an agenda for business—the hon. Gentleman's agenda would destroy business in this country and abroad.

Mr. Thomason: Will my hon. Friend confirm that, in considering their policies on the WTO and the impending conference in Singapore, the Government will take account of global environmental issues and treat them as part of the core policy matters?

Mr. Nelson: Yes indeed. I know of the deep interest that my hon. Friend takes in this matter on the Select Committee; I was pleased to give him that assurance this morning at a meeting of that Committee, and I do so again now. Although the agenda for Singapore will be principally concerned with further trade liberalisation measures, the environmental subtext will also be extremely important.

We see no incompatibility between measures that will provide for sustainable global development and measures that will further liberalise world trade. We believe that the two should go hand in hand, and we shall be in the vanguard of those forcefully arguing for that in Singapore.

Gas Suppliers

6. **Mr. Jamieson:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what steps his Department is taking to monitor complaints from gas consumers about fraudulent attempts to switch customers from British Gas to other suppliers. [28361]

9. **Mr. Graham:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what steps he is taking to check the activities of private gas companies fraudulently mis–selling gas contracts to consumers. [28364]

Mr. John M. Taylor: My Department is not aware of any cases where licensed gas suppliers have acted fraudulently in the domestic market. Any person with evidence of such activities should bring it before the proper authorities.

Mr. Jamieson: Is the Minister aware that Devon trading standards officers have received 336 complaints about SWEBgas and its mis-selling of contracts to people in the south-west? Does he not realise that his reluctance to root out such practices demonstrates the Government's incompetence and neglect of consumer interests?

Mr. Taylor: I reject that analysis. I find the Opposition's attitude profoundly depressing. Some 40,000 households in the south-west are benefiting from competitive gas supplies at prices between 15 and 20 per cent. below those of British Gas, representing an annual saving of about £70 per household. When will the Opposition stop whingeing and start welcoming the tremendous benefits for customers that competition brings?

Mr. Graham: Does the Minister realise that this is about not cheap gas but quality of service? As a former member of the Scottish Gas Consumers Council, I am astounded by the number of dissatisfied customers and people who have been conned by unscrupulous private gas companies. Ofgas is not acting on their behalf either. When will the Secretary of State do something to give consumers confidence in the industry and the protection that they deserve from this or any other Government?

Mr. Taylor: Consumers are benefiting from reduced prices and greater choice. The consumer is protected in a wide range of ways. A great deal of information has been provided. Ofgas operates a helpline; then there is the Gas Consumers Council; and there are trading standards officers. Moreover, customers have the right to withdraw from contracts if they want to. Meanwhile, there are plentiful benefits in the form of choice and gain for the consumer.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Is my hon. Friend entirely satisfied that the recent activities of the regulator are in the long-term interests of those who consume gas and those who work in the gas industry?

Mr. Taylor: The recent activities to which the hon. Gentleman refers—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hon. Friend."] I apologise for misdescribing my hon. Friend. The regulator has to strike a balance of interest between provider and consumer. If British Gas feels hard done by following those recent decisions, it is open to the company to ask for the industry to be referred to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission—but it must be self-evident to everyone that falling prices are good for consumers.

Mr. Neil Hamilton: Does my hon. Friend agree that the one thing consumers are not complaining about is the 23 per cent. fall in prices to domestic consumers since privatisation and the real terms 50 per cent. fall in prices to industrial consumers? Does not the nature of the questioning from the Opposition show that old Labour is alive and kicking, completely failing to understand the market economy and the benefits of competition? As a result of decisions taken in the Department when I held my hon. Friend's portfolio—decisions to free up the market in gas—will not the consumer in the years ahead enjoy even greater benefits than those experienced so far?

Mr. Taylor: The consumer must be the beneficiary of those things. I understand that, if implemented, the new Ofgas price control proposals will bring further price cuts of 10 per cent. to consumers nationwide in 1997, and more reductions in later years.

Mr. Harvey: What will be the effect on the prices gas customers pay in a competitive market if an interconnector with Europe is established? Continental Europe pays much higher prices for gas than we do.

Will that not give gas suppliers a new market, which, in terms of supply and demand, will result in much higher prices being paid in this country?

Mr. Taylor: No. I condemn that as nonsensical. The more variety there is for the customer to choose from, the better. Let the consumer be king in these matters—provide the consumer with variety and let the consumer choose.

Mr. Bill Walker: Is my hon. Friend aware that many Conservative Members welcome the fact that we have competition, because it is as a result of competition that we get competitive prices? Having said that, I remind my hon. Friend that some of us believe that Scottish Gas has done a very good job in Scotland. The fact that we welcome competition does not mean that we in any way devalue the work that Scottish Gas has already done.

Mr. Taylor: My hon. Friend speaks very fairly of Scotland. He has the advantage over me in having a Scottish constituency, but all the evidence and anecdotal reports that I have received suggest that what my hon. Friend said is right, and that credit should be given where it is due.

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: Is it not astonishing that a Minister has not read the critical report, published this morning, by the Office of Fair Trading on that matter? Why do Conservatives seem to know the price of everything and the value of nothing? Why are they not taking steps to tackle the fraudulent mis-selling of those new gas contracts by revoking the licences of SWEBgas and Calortex? Is it not the case that dogs bark, ducks quack and Conservative Ministers join the boards of privatised utilities?

Mr. Taylor: The pilot scheme operating in the south-west is operating there because the Gas Consumers Council for the south-west argued that it was the appropriate area for the pilot to run in. In a pilot scheme, when there is no precedent and no previous experience to follow, it is likely that, on one hand, there will be zeal by salesmen, and on the other that there may be some confusion, but nearly 50,000 people have taken up that offer of choice, and they will benefit from lower prices. I do not want to deny them that.

Inward Investment

10. **Mr. Waterson:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on the current level of inward investment into (a) the United Kingdom, (b) France and (c) Germany. [28365]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Phillip Oppenheim): The latest OECD figures available show that, in 1993, the UK attracted £130 billion by value of stock compared with approximately £80 billion for France and £41 billion for Germany.

Mr. Waterson: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. How does he explain the fact that this country seems to be attracting more inward investment than France and Germany put together? Is it merely a co-incidence, or is it due to the fact that, in this country, we have a Government who are committed to enterprise and to reducing burdens on business, and who will have nothing to do with the pettifogging, bureaucratic interference in business that we can expect from Opposition Members, the home-grown socialists, or their socialist friends in Europe?

Mr. Oppenheim: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Because he was politically active in the 1970s, he will remember the 1970s fondly as the good old days of Labour's industrial strategy, when international companies fell over themselves to move production from Britain and a trade union leader said that he would not buy a Ford made in a British plant, but would only buy one from a German plant.

Now, by contrast, Ford and General Motors are using Britain as a core export base; Toyota, Honda and Nissan are exporting; and even Rover, which used to make such world-beaters as the Austin Allegro and the Morris Marina under Labour Governments, is now exporting more than half its production.

Mrs. Anne Campbell: Is it not true that the increase in inward investment in 1995 is largely due to takeovers of investment banks and privatised utilities? How is that bringing extra jobs to the UK?

Mr. Oppenheim: I do not think the hon. Lady is right, but I shall be interested in any figures that she can produce. What is true is that the manufacturing performance of this country has been transformed.

Manufacturing productivity, which is the key element in competitiveness, was stagnant and bottom of all the major industrial countries when the Labour party was in power, whereas manufacturing productivity growth has been top of the G7 countries under the present Government. I remind the hon. Lady that manufacturing output actually fell under the last Labour Government, whereas it has risen quite sharply under the present Government.

Mr. Atkins: Does my hon. Friend accept that part of that inward investment will have come from Saudi Arabia? Does he agree that Saudi Arabia is an extremely important trading and investment partner, and that the constant criticism in the media about its importance to export, investment and other trade with this country can only be damaging and ought to be stopped?

Mr. Oppenheim: I entirely agree. It always amazes me that Opposition Members are so quick to attack countries that are our good trading partners and allies, when it is clear that in many other countries that still have socialist regimes human rights abuses are far worse than they are in Saudi Arabia.

Mr. Tony Banks: Will the Minister comment on the fact that one of the reasons given for the substantial investment by Taiwan in south Wales that has been announced—

Mr. John D. Taylor: South Korea.

Mr. Banks: I am told that the investment is coming from South Korea. One of the reasons given for that is

that the rates for skilled workers in South Korea are higher than those in south Wales. Is the Minister proud of the fact that the Conservative Government are building a coolie economy? If so, when can we expect to see little boys going up chimneys again?

Mr. Oppenheim: That was one of the silliest questions that the hon. Gentleman has ever asked. He makes the simple error that all his hon. Friends make: they confuse low wages with low costs. If they were correct, everything would now be made in Bangladesh. What matters is wages relative to productivity. The real difference between Britain now and Britain in the 1970s is not that wages have fallen—they have risen by 50 per cent. in real terms since 1979—but that productivity has increased by 90 per cent. since the days of stagnant productivity under Labour. That is why British industry is successful again, and why foreign companies want to come and manufacture goods here.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Has my hon. Friend observed that there has been something of a downturn in new inward investment in the United Kingdom? Might that be because of new Labour's threatened policy of windfall taxes on those who make high profits? Is it not clear that, while a Conservative Government have been ensuring that the utilities, for instance, have given money back to the consumer—which is what people want—the Labour party has got it completely wrong, and is already trying to scare off inward investment?

Mr. Oppenheim: I agree. I thought it interesting that, at this morning's press conference on the youth guarantee, the great and dear leader did not mention his primary policy for youth, the minimum wage. Perhaps he needs a youth guarantee because of all the young people who will lose their jobs if Labour is ever given the chance to implement that policy.

Manufacturing Output

11. **Mr. Chisholm:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what has been the change in the level of manufacturing output in the past three months. [28366]

Mr. Oppenheim: Manufacturing output has grown by 0.5 per cent. during the past three months.

Mr. Chisholm: Will the Minister confirm that manufacturing industry is now officially in recession following the second quarterly fall in output? Will he also confirm that manufacturing employment will continue to fall over the next few months, as stated in the leaked memorandum from the President of the Board of Trade to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury? How many more people will have to lose their jobs because of the Government's neglect of manufacturing industry?

Mr. Oppenheim: The hon. Gentleman is wrong on both points. First, manufacturing industry is not in recession; in fact, it has expanded at a time when in most of the rest of Europe it has been stagnant, or has contracted. Secondly, manufacturing employment rose last year. We shall be able to take Labour's complaints about manufacturing industry seriously only when it first has the guts to admit to the disastrous legacy that it left as a result of its industrial strategy in the 1970s, and secondly makes clear what its policies are. Even when it has a policy, such as the minimum wage, it has not the guts or the honesty to tell people at what level it will set that wage. However, we know that every one of its policies would cost manufacturers jobs and competitiveness, raise costs and lose exports.

Mr. Forman: Does not asking a question about the level of manufacturing output over the past three months show a complete lack of proper perspective? If we consider the level over a sensible period, such as since 1980, we discover that manufacturing output has increased by about 30 per cent. Will my hon. Friend confirm that those are the figures on which the House should focus?

Mr. Oppenheim: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the most astonishing things about the attitude of Opposition Members is that they seem conveniently to forget that, when they were in power, our manufacturing performance was diabolical—manufacturing output fell and the balance of trade was moving rapidly into deficit. Under this Government, not only has manufacturing output risen sharply, but we have had the best record of any major industrial country in manufacturing productivity growth.

Mr. Sheerman: The Minister knows that, in the bad old days of 1979, 2.5 million more people were working in manufacturing industry than are today. We made more, and sold more abroad than we imported—that is pretty good economics. If the Minister is going to put his head in the sand and ignore the fact that there is a manufacturing downturn that is serious for the country's future, we face a disaster in the autumn. When will the Government address reality?

Mr. Oppenheim: The hon. Gentleman is right on one important point. Manufacturing jobs have been lost—not only in this country, but in every industrial country in the world. Indeed, as the hon. Gentleman well knows, a huge number of manufacturing jobs were lost under the last Labour Government. That is in the nature of modern economies—when productivity increases, more is made by fewer people. In a sense, that is the sign of a successful economy. The difference between the 1970s, and the 1980s and 1990s is that, in the 1970s, we were losing manufacturing jobs and manufacturing output whereas, since 1979, we have increased our output substantially and become more productive and competitive. That is the only way in which to create what we all, regardless of party, ultimately want: a competitive economy that will guarantee high-quality jobs for everyone.

Mr. John Marshall: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is absurd, even by their standards, for Opposition Members to talk about manufacturing output when they would impose a national minimum wage, a social chapter and a single currency—all of which would lead to a reduction in manufacturing output?

Mr. Oppenheim: My hon. Friend is right. Apart from that, Opposition Members are reticent about telling us the exact detail of their policies, and I can probably understand why. They are probably afraid that the hon.

Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) will put the evil eye on them—just as he has done to his old buddy the shadow Chancellor. As my hon. Friend said, the Opposition policies of which we know—the minimum wage and raising taxes on business—would cost jobs, cut exports and cut our competitiveness.

Mr. Ingram: Why does the Minister refuse to accept the truth, which has been stated by independent commentators, that our manufacturing industry is facing a Government-induced recession? Is it because the Minister shares the view of Geoffrey Dicks, an economist at NatWest Markets, who said of the recent downturn in manufacturing output that it is not worrying that manufacturing has become as small a part of the economy as it has? Is not that statement an accurate reflection of the Government's policy towards the manufacturing sector? The Government do not want it to work; they want to hurt it.

Mr. Oppenheim: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will tell the House why, if there is a so-called recession in manufacturing—which, in fact, does not exist—it is worse in Europe, where manufacturing output has fallen sharply, than in this country? The truth is that manufacturing industry in Britain has regained three quarters of the competitiveness against Germany that it lost in the late 1970s under the last Labour Government. When will Opposition Members admit the disastrous legacy of ruin that they left for manufacturing industry in 1979? I do not deny that there are problems in manufacturing industry—of course there are, we are still not as competitive as the best—but we have made up much of the ground that we lost in the 1960s and 1970s, primarily under Labour Governments.

Exports

12. **Mr. Pawsey:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is the current value of British exports; what it was in (a) 1979 and (b) 1989; what are the United Kingdom's principal markets; and what they were in (i) 1979 and (ii) 1989. [28367]

Mr. Nelson: In 1995, the value of United Kingdom visible exports was £153 billion. United Kingdom visible exports were worth £40 billion in 1979 and £92 billion in 1989. In 1995, the United Kingdom's top four export markets were Germany, the United States of America, France and the Netherlands, the same countries as in 1979 and 1989.

Mr. Pawsey: Does my hon. Friend agree that those figures underline the success of the Government's policy in promoting exports? Does he further agree that that success is based on a combination of low interest rates and low inflation, and that all that success would be placed at risk if we introduced the social chapter, a move that is urged by Opposition Members?

Mr. Nelson: I agree with everything that my hon. Friend has said. This is a success story which I hope will be proclaimed in all parts of the House. It has not just happened against stiff international competition; it has happened because of distinctly Conservative Government policies—tough policies over a number of years—to improve the competitiveness of British industry. Also exciting is their effect on a range of industries. Manufacturing, about which we have heard a great deal today, has been a major beneficiary. Manufactured exports are up by 11 per cent. over the past year. About 10 years ago, oil was our biggest export; now, electrical machinery is. That says something about the competitiveness and success of the United Kingdom's manufactured exports.

Mrs. Ewing: In view of the significant contribution made by the Scotch whisky industry to exports, especially to the European Union, is any progress being made with harmonising tax regimes?

Mr. Nelson: I hear what the hon. Lady says and I welcome the fact that she speaks up for the Scotch whisky industry. I also claim to be its champion worldwide. The other matter that the hon. Lady mentions is one for my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and I shall ensure that her representation is drawn to his attention.

Lady Olga Maitland: Will my hon. Friend confirm that our volume of manufactured exports since 1981 has vastly exceeded those of France and Germany? Does he agree that that is because we are not fettered by the social chapter and a minimum wage and are able to compete at a real and competitive rate?

Mr. Nelson: Those are significant influences on our export performance. We are now exporting more per head than the United States or Japan, and much of that is due to the reduced cost base and the more competitive situation that obtains here. However, a good part of it is also due to the much lower, and sustained, plateaux of inflation and interest rates to which my hon. Friend—and my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby and Kenilworth (Mr. Pawsey)—referred. We must follow the tough policies that will make that endure. The major beneficiaries will be our exporting and employing industries.

Mr. Madden: Will the Minister confirm that India remains a foremost export market for United Kingdom companies? Will he also confirm that, as a result of the recent elections there, there is grave concern about the political instability which clearly now exists and about the growing tension between India and Pakistan, not least over the issue of Kashmir? Will he press British Aerospace to cancel the deal for the sale of 23 Hawk 100 aircraft to India and the transfer of technology that would enable India to produce Hawk aircraft? Will he arrange for export credits and export guarantees to be withdrawn and press for this irresponsible deal to be cancelled immediately?

Mr. Nelson: No, I will not. However, I join the hon. Gentleman in celebrating the fact that our exports to India and our trade with that country have increased exponentially. They are up by some 80 per cent. over the past three years. That is a tremendous tribute to the Indo-British partnership that our Prime Minister and the Prime Minister of India instigated. I hope that the result of the recent Indian elections will not in any way interrupt our excellent trading relations with India. If defence is part of that, I am very pleased, and I do not think that it will influence in any way the outcome or resolution of the

extremely unhappy situation in Kashmir about which the hon. Gentleman has spoken in the House on more than one occasion.

Trade Promoters

14. **Mr. Jacques Arnold:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on the work of the trade promoters in his Department. [28370]

Mr. Nelson: The number of export promoters remains at around 100. This is a partnership between the Government and the private sector that helps us win in overseas markets. I pay tribute to the companies that have seconded high-calibre executives to the Department to boost our export efforts.

Mr. Arnold: My hon. Friend will be aware of the opportunities opening up for British exporters in the growth markets of the world, particularly in Latin America. I am sure that he is aware of the great progress that is being made by the bigger British firms in particular. Is he aware that small and medium-sized firms have terrific opportunities in Latin American markets and that the export promoters to whom he has referred are a key element in making introductions and helping them into those markets?

Mr. Nelson: The Government spend approximately £200 million a year on export promotion programmes of one kind or another, and a good part of that money is focused on small to medium-sized enterprises. The Government are keen to promote the export habit among small and medium-sized businesses, not just on our doorstep in Europe but in the new and exciting growth markets of south America. We are having difficulties in some areas, including south America, in recruiting export promoters. I am grateful to the 157 companies that have come forward and seconded export promoters, and I hope that there will be growth in the number of active export promoters in south America.

Mrs. Roche: How can the Minister be so complacent when, this week, we have had the publication of the Grant Thornton survey, which shows that our European rivals export more than our small and medium-sized enterprises? Is it not about time that the Minister and the Government did something in this area and created a database of exporters so that we can catch up with some of our competitors who have already created such databases?

Mr. Nelson: The hon. Lady must get up to date with the facts. Does she not know what the business links are doing? I would be happy to provide her with some information about the database that they are building to help small business, in particular, to access business and export opportunities worldwide. As far as reports are concerned, I would rather take notice of the report issued by the National Audit Office in April. Its key finding was that the services looked at in the sample market

"helped to generate an extra £345 million of additional business"

at a cost of £4.5 million and generated important intermediate benefits, such as business contacts and increasing export competence. Taxpayers' money is being well spent in export promotion, not just for major companies but for small to medium-sized companies as well.

Mr. Congdon: I welcome the important role of export trade promoters. Does my hon. Friend agree that their success is dependent on Britain's businesses producing goods and services at prices that people overseas are willing and able to pay? Does he also agree that the price of those products would inevitably increase if the additional burdens of the social chapter and the minimum wage were placed on businesses and that those price increases would put many of our companies out of the export market and ensure that people lost their jobs?

Mr. Nelson: Yes, I agree. I believe that labour costs in Germany are almost double what they are in the United Kingdom. The cost and the infrastructure imposed on businesses by the social chapter would be enormous. Let us remember that we have had the lion's share of inward investment because of the new competitive scene that the Government and Conservative policies have created. The biggest danger to employment, exports and productivity in this country is any change of course promoted by the Labour party, and we will have no part in it.

Steel Industry

15. **Mr. Barry Jones:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on the steel industry. [28371]

Mr. Lang: The United Kingdom's steel industry is highly competitive, ranking among the world's best. Productivity has increased five-fold since the 1970s and exports of steel products are worth more than £4 billion.

Mr. Jones: Will the Minister accept an invitation to visit one of the world's finest steel finishing plants—Shotton steelworks in my constituency? Does he agree that the Governments of Spain, Italy and Belgium are bending the rules of the steel aid code to the detriment of steelworks such as Shotton, the Welsh finishing plants and the stripmills? Does he agree that the steelworkers of Britain have made huge sacrifices in the way of tens of thousands of redundancies over the past 10 years? Will he use his veto on the steel aid code, if necessary, to stop cheating on the continent?

Mr. Lang: I welcome the Labour party's change in tone regarding Governments who use subsidies to support their steel industries. We shall certainly support the renewal of the steel state aid code on the basis that it is at least as tough as the present code.

As to the hon. Gentleman's kind invitation to visit his constituency, I shall consult my diary. I believe that Shotton celebrates its centenary this year. Its finest years in the past century occurred during its time in the private sector. As a result of the investment of £20 million in 1990, last year, the mill passed its steel production target of £1 million per annum. It is now one of the world's premier sites for the production of coated steel. That is a tribute to the privatisation of British Steel.

Free Trade

17. **Mr. MacShane:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what steps he is taking to strengthen the global regulation of free trade. [28373]

Mr. Lang: The Government attach a high priority to developing the multilateral trading system based on the World Trade Organisation. The WTO ministerial meeting in Singapore in December should set in train a comprehensive work programme to carry forward the process of multilateral trade liberalisation, building on the achievements of the Uruguay round.

Mr. MacShane: Does the Secretary of State agree that one of the biggest impediments to world free trade is the increasingly protectionist approach of the United States of America? Will he protest to Washington about, first, its ban on beef imports from the United Kingdom; secondly, the level of subsidy given to each American farmer which is twice the amount received by European farmers; thirdly, the outrageous embargo on Cuba, which is now threatening British firms; and, fourthly, the withdrawal of world telecommunications liberalisation from WTO discussions because it is not convenient for Motorola? Will he tell the protectionists in Washington to open up and support free trade?

Mr. Lang: I again welcome the Labour party's change in tone: it is suddenly against protection and in favour of free trade. We have identified all the points raised by the hon. Gentleman and they will continue to feature in our discussions. I hope that he will welcome the great progress that was made during the Uruguay round under the general agreement on tariffs and trade and the substantial improvements that have occurred.

As to the hon. Gentleman's last point about telecommunications, the negotiations have been postponed and we shall work hard to ensure that they are concluded in time for the arrangements to come into force as targeted originally.

Mr. Dunn: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Labour party's defence of free trade is as absurd as a whistling pig? Does he agree that the Conservative party is the only party that favours free trade? We oppose every form of regulation, whether from Europe or from elsewhere in the world.

Mr. Lang: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He may have noticed in the press the report of my speech in which I identified 2020 as the target for achieving global free trade. That will be attained through a series of steps, the first of which will occur in Singapore this year when the British Government will lay before the meeting an agenda that will move incrementally towards freer trade.

Shipbuilding

18. **Mr. Davidson:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on future prospects for the shipbuilding industry. [28374]

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Energy (Mr. Richard Page): I am pleased that United Kingdom shipyards are continuing to improve their competitiveness and to win orders in the face of very difficult international market conditions. I thank the hon. Gentleman for being the only one to turn up and ask me a question.

Mr. Davidson: I thank the Minister for that answer. However, having rushed all the way from Glasgow to hear it, I had hoped that it would be more satisfactory. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that the international competitors to our shipbuilding industry do not cheat by receiving unfair subsidies from their Governments? As the Minister knows, the shipbuilding industry has taken considerable steps to reform itself, but it is being undermined by unfair foreign competition.

Mr. Page: I, too, want a level playing field. If there is any evidence that people are cutting corners and bending the rules, it should be presented to the Department of Trade and Industry where it will be followed up vigorously. It is intended that the shipbuilding intervention fund should be abolished—it should be signed on 15 July—which would mean no subsidies to any shipyards throughout the world, so we will have that level playing field.

Mr. James Hill: Does my hon. Friend agree that not just shipbuilding, but ship repair, is of great importance to United Kingdom yards? Will he join me in congratulating the Cunard shipping line? For the first time, under the management of its new owners, it will, this year, have its total maintenance check—work that is worth £12 million—performed in the port of Southampton. Is not that good news for our ports?

Mr. Page: My hon. Friend is right to remind the House that not only shipbuilding, but ship repair, count—as does the construction of sail, pleasure and sporting boats: it goes throughout the piece. It provides a great deal of work and employment throughout the country. I willingly echo his congratulations of Cunard. The United Kingdom has some excellent ship repair companies and I hope that more companies will take advantage of the facilities that are offered.

Manufacturing Industry

19. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on trends in manufacturing industry. [28376]

Mr. Lang: In the current recovery, output in manufacturing has risen by more than 8 per cent., exports have risen by a quarter to record levels, and investment in plant and machinery has risen by 16 per cent.

Mr. Winterton: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply, but, in the light of the sad and regrettable redundancies in the clothing and textile industry, which is an important part of the United Kingdom's manufacturing economy, has he received from the industry any estimate of the cost on its wage bill of the minimum wage? It advises me that as much as 30 per cent. could be put on its wage bill, which would make it uncompetitive internationally and could lead to many hundreds of redundancies in textile and clothing constituencies.

Will my right hon. Friend perhaps give me an update on progress in opening export markets since the conclusion of the Uruguay round, and in validation of the tariff reductions that have been claimed?

Mr. Lang: I am naturally sorry to hear about the loss of jobs in my hon. Friend's constituency, but I am sure that he will welcome the fact that, since the beginning of 1994, overall employment in manufacturing industry has risen by about 50,000. He is right to identify the national minimum wage as a particular danger to the textile industry. A recent survey showed that, at a rate of some £4 per hour, 139,975 jobs would be lost in north-west England. That illustrates the vulnerability of employment that would derive from a national minimum wage, especially in the UK's regions.

Mr. Pearson: Did the Secretary of State read in the *Financial Times* yesterday an article called "The ill... of manufacturing", which quoted a study that said that, between 1973 and 1992, output grew by more than 50 per cent. in the United States of America and by more than by two thirds in Italy and Japan, but by only a miserly 1.3 per cent. in the UK? Is not the problem as much one of stagnant output in the past 20 years as poor productivity? What are the Government going to do about it?

Mr. Lang: The hon. Gentleman did not hear the figures that I gave in answer to the main question. I said that, since the beginning of the recovery, output in manufacturing industry had risen by 8 per cent. If he contrasts that with what happened under the last Labour Government, when output fell by an average of 0.5 per cent. per annum, he will reflect on the considerable progress that has been made. Since 1979, manufacturing industry exports have risen by 90 per cent. and productivity has risen by 80 per cent. That is a measure of the turnround that is leading to record exports and to record inward investment.

Single Market Compliance Unit

20. **Mr. Steen:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what are the staff numbers and the annual budget of the single market compliance unit. [28377]

Mr. Oppenheim: The single market compliance unit was relaunched on 28 March as action single market. It now has three full-time, and three part-time, staff helping UK businesses tackle trade barriers and illegal state aids in other single market countries. Running costs allocated to the activity amount to about £100,000 for the current financial year and most of it is staff costs.

Mr. Steen: Is not the only way in which we can be sure that all European countries enforce directives, rules and regulations equally either to have cross-border enforcement, with our officials going over the border to other European countries to enforce rules and regulations and other European countries sending their officials here to do the same, or to have a massive European plain-clothes police force of bureaucrats in Brussels enforcing rules and regulations centrally? Surely the man and the dog in my hon. Friend's Department will not solve the problem.

Mr. Oppenheim: My hon. Friend's comments remind me of the joke about European hell and European heaven. If I remember correctly, in European heaven the English are the police and the Germans are the car mechanics—there are various other characters, but I shall not go through all of them—and in European hell the Germans are the police and the English are the cooks. I do not think that it would be feasible for United Kingdom inspectors to go overseas to inspect other countries.

However, we have the Commission. Although it does not always act as we want it to, it quite often does. Secondly, we ultimately have the right to appeal to the European Court. Indeed, we have taken the case of Air France to the European Court. We are also monitoring the conditions that the Commission has placed on Iberia subsidies. I do not think that we shall ever have such a thing as a perfect single market, but the European Community single market, which this country worked so hard to create, is significantly better than what we would have had otherwise. It is not perfect, but it addresses many of the problems.

Mr. Flynn: How can we use the single market compliance unit when we count all the jobs that come here from abroad but do not keep any record of the jobs that are syphoned out of Britain to European countries? Why did the highly successful, super-technology British company Inmos move from my constituency and relocate in a European country that has both the social chapter and the minimum wage?

Mr. Oppenheim: Largely because it was bought by a state-owned Italian-French company. If the hon. Gentleman is—*[Interruption.]* Will the hon. Gentleman contain his excitement for a moment? If he is arguing for nationalisation and state subsidies, he will find himself in opposition to Conservative Members and—apparently—to most of his hon. Friends, most of whom have, during this Question Time, criticised subsidies and said how successful the unsubsidised British steel and British shipbuilding industries have been in the private sector. I suggest that he has a word with some of his colleagues.

Gas Suppliers

22. **Ms Church:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what discussions his Department has had with gas companies about the methods they have used to persuade consumers to switch their custom from British Gas. [28379]

Mr. John M. Taylor: Marketing approaches are a matter for gas companies, subject to the provisions of their licences and normal contract and consumer law. The Office of Gas Supply has produced a range of leaflets for consumers, including one that explains cancellation rights under general law in relation to doorstep sales. Further cancellation rights are provided under the standard licence conditions for gas suppliers.

Ms Church: I thank the Minister for his answer and for the answers that he gave to my hon. Friends the Members for Plymouth, Devonport (Mr. Jamieson) and for Renfrew, West and Inverclyde (Mr. Graham). Will he give an undertaking that, where there have been proven instances of mis-selling of gas by gas companies which have not been fit and proper, compensation will be made available to the consumers who have suffered?

Mr. Taylor: The correct approach for anybody who feels that there has been irregular negotiation of new contracts with alternative suppliers is to report the matter to the local trading standards officer or the Gas Consumers Council, where advice will be readily and sympathetically available.

Underground Mines

23. **Mr. Skinner:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade when he last met trade unions leaders from the mining industry to discuss the operation of underground mines. [28380]

Mr. Page: My ministerial colleagues and I meet representatives of the coal mining industry as necessary.

Mr. Skinner: Is the Minister aware that, in the first year since the massive pit closure programme in the early 1990s and the subsequent privatisation, the rate of notifiable accidents has risen by 50 per cent. and the rate of serious accidents—falls of roofs and so on—has increased by 80 per cent. in about 20 coal mines? At the same time, Richard Budge's salary has risen by 60 per cent. to £661,000, and his profits have gone up by £173 million. Does the Minister agree that that is blood money and the sooner that the pits are taken back into public ownership without compensation, the better?

Mr. Page: I regret any accidents or fatalities in pits, and I find it disgusting that the hon. Gentleman has tried to make a political point with the deaths of miners. I draw to his attention the fact that, in 1985-86, 27 people suffered fatalities. The number dropped to 15 in the next year, and to nine in the year after that. Fatalities then went up to 18. The hon. Gentleman was not in the House shouting about blood money then, and he should be ashamed of himself for doing so today.

Nuclear-related Materials Trade

25. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on trade between the United Kingdom and Belarus and Kazakhstan in nuclear-related materials. [28384]

Mr. Oppenheim: All such goods of proliferation concern are controlled and require an export licence. In the past two years, the Department of Trade and Industry has issued only two licences for such goods to those destinations—for items to be used in oilfield exploration in Kazakhstan. In the same period, there have been no applications for import licences for nuclear-related goods that require such a licence.

Mr. Dalyell: On 1 May, during the debate on the draft order, I asked Foreign Office Ministers about any help that we could give in the matter of the crumbling sarcophaguses—particularly those covering the Chernobyl radioactive areas. The Ministers said that they would consider the matter. What are the British Government doing to help with the very dangerous sarcophagus problem at Chernobyl?

Mr. Oppenheim: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, I do not think that that question relates directly to the main question he asked. I shall certainly write to him and explain exactly what the Government are doing. If he wants to come to the Department to discuss the matter, I shall be happy to organise that.

Madam Speaker: I now call Mr. Michael Brown to ask Question 45, which was incorrectly unstarred.

Manufacturing Industry

45. **Mr. Michael Brown:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement about manufacturing industry in the Yorkshire and Humberside region. [28357]

Mr. Page: Manufacturing industry in Yorkshire and Humberside is now more competitive and better adapted to the demands of a modern economy than ever before, and it is well placed to take advantage of the continuing recovery and increasing opportunities in overseas markets. I know from my regular visits to the region that many of its manufacturing companies are among the best in the world.

Mr. Brown: My constituents will be delighted to have our own Question Time today—we should like to have one every day. May I tell my hon. Friend that that is excellent news? Does he agree that my constituency is in the vanguard of ensuring the statistics that he has just produced? Does he realise that, this week, we will have the opening of the new Grimsby fish docks, which will benefit Grimsby and my constituency? Is not that a tribute to how manufacturing industry in general has shown a renaissance in the old South Humberside area of Humberside? Will he take this opportunity to congratulate all those who are involved in manufacturing industry on the south bank of the river Humber?

Mr. Page: As sponsor Minister for Yorkshire and Humberside, I congratulate my hon. Friend on creating his own Question Time—I believe that he deserves nothing else, and on an on-going basis. I know that he has worked extremely hard to bring about the Grimsby port project. I also know that the Government have offered quite a few million pounds of taxpayers' money to help bring it to fruition. The project is another example of how that area is blossoming—which is due purely and simply to the way in which the Government have been offering and operating regional support. The only thing that will harm that part of our country is if the Labour party allows the deadly duo of the social contract and the minimum wage to be let loose on it.

Mr. Hardy: Does the Minister accept that the number of new jobs created in recent years does not begin to match the number that have been lost in our region? Does he accept that the antics and attitudes of a large section of the Conservative party seem likely to discourage and deter the inward investment that is so badly needed in our area?

Mr. Page: While I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, I am afraid that his comments are not borne out by the facts. I can spend a considerable amount of time telling him that, in his constituency, Reflex Sound and Light Systems Ltd. has been given regional selective assistance—as have Waterstone Glassware Ltd., Pyronix Ltd., Fear Free Doors, Aquion Ltd. and Morphy Richards Ltd. Those are jobs that have been brought into the region by regional selective assistance from the Government.

Forensic Explosives Laboratory

3.34 pm

Mr. Jack Straw (Blackburn) (*by private notice*) asked the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the problems arising from the use of contaminated equipment at the forensic explosives laboratory, Sevenoaks.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Michael Howard): As I explained yesterday in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mr. Merchant), on 14 March 1996 a small amount of the explosive RDX, one of the main components of Semtex, was detected in a part of a centrifuge at the forensic explosive laboratory. The laboratory is part of the Ministry of Defence's Defence Evaluation and Research Agency but provides scientific support to the police and Crown Prosecution Service in cases involving the criminal use of explosives.

One of the services that the laboratory provides involves the laboratory analysis of swab samples taken to determine the presence of explosives and the type involved. That "trace" analysis involves a range of procedures, including the use in many cases of a centrifuge.

The contamination involved not more that 30 micrograms, or 30 millionths of a gram, of RDX. It was detected in a part of a laboratory centrifuge that was probably already contaminated on its arrival at the forensic explosives laboratory in 1989. By normal standards, the amount of explosive detected was tiny; nevertheless, it should not have been there.

The contamination was discovered following one of the laboratory's weekly quality assurance exercises. As soon as it was discovered, work was stopped and the centrifuge taken out of operational action. The forensic explosives laboratory then instigated an immediate investigation into the source of the contamination and any implications there might be for casework samples.

As I told the House yesterday, all the information from that preliminary investigation was laid before the Government in a formal report. A copy of it was placed in the Library yesterday.

There is a small theoretical possibility that casework samples showing RDX traces may have been affected by the centrifuge contamination. Regular quality assurance tests are undertaken by the laboratory. In addition, every time the laboratory examines a casework sample it also tests a control. Neither of those checks at any stage indicated RDX traces at a level that would suggest that casework samples are likely to have been contaminated. However, further investigations are required to determine precisely how the incident occurred and what the implications are for the criminal cases involving RDX in which evidence was submitted by the forensic explosives laboratory.

That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence and I agreed that an independent review should be established to look into those matters. As I explained to the House yesterday, the terms of reference of that review will be to report on the general likelihood of contamination being spread from the centrifuge to samples in the laboratory; to examine FEL papers on all cases in which RDX traces were found and a criminal conviction resulted, and assess the likelihood of contamination; and to examine FEL procedures in the trace laboratory and make recommendations.

As the House knows, I have invited Professor Brian Caddy to undertake that review. Professor Caddy is Professor of Forensic Science at Strathclyde university and is a renowned expert in the field of trace explosives. He was involved in the appeal cases of the Birmingham Six on behalf of the appellants and advised the Maguire family for the May inquiry.

Professor Caddy will report to me in the first instance, but the results and recommendations of his review will be made public, and I will, of course, bring his findings to the House. In advance of that, as soon as a definitive list has been established, and agreed with Professor Caddy, the representatives of those whose cases involved an RDX trace and resulted in a conviction will be notified. As I said yesterday, on present information it is thought that about a dozen cases could be involved.

I will consider in the light of Professor Caddy's report whether particular cases should be referred to the Court of Appeal. If any case is referred to that court, it will then be for it to weigh the evidence and decide how to proceed.

From the information presently available to me, it would appear that the risk of contamination is small, but in a matter of this importance and sensitivity, I am determined to act only on the basis of the most rigorous and independent scientific assessment. As I have already said, I will keep the House fully informed of the outcome of Professor Caddy's review and the measures that flow from it. It would be wrong to leap to assumptions about any case until we have clear scientific evidence on which to base proper decisions. I hope that the House will recognise that in the regrettable circumstances of this incident, the Government have taken every proper measure to deal with the consequences.

Mr. Straw: Does the Secretary of State accept that what we now know about fundamental flaws in the forensic testing of explosives is bound to weaken public confidence in the criminal justice system and that we may end up with the worst of all worlds—innocent people in prison and the guilty walking free? Given the seriousness of the situation, does he not understand that if he had come to the House of his own accord yesterday he would have earned credit for his approach? Instead, through his tawdry attempt yesterday to bypass the House, he has made a serious situation worse.

Was it not treating the House with contempt that journalists were told by the Secretary of State's office on Monday that an important announcement was imminent and that they were briefed at 3.15 pm yesterday while Members of Parliament were kept in the dark until the last possible moment? Contrary to the impression that he has just given that the flaws emerged as a result of a routine weekly test, will he acknowledge what is spelt out in paragraph 3.1 of the report: that nothing would have come to light but for the pure chance of an accident in the laboratory in which, unusually, a glass centrifuge tube broke?

Is the Secretary of State not aware that serious anxieties about quality control in forensic laboratories have been expressed time and again and that on every occasion to date, Ministers have shown breathtaking complacency in

[Mr. Straw]

resisting proper independent scrutiny of their work? Why have Ministers so long refused to act on the views of the Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology, which is chaired by Lord Dainton, and on the specific recommendations of the royal commission on criminal justice that there should be established a forensic science advisory council to report to the Home Secretary on the performance, achievement and efficiency of those laboratories?

In particular, why did the Secretary of State ignore the strident warning by Lord Chief Justice Taylor in 1994 that the establishment of such a council was "urgently needed" and "overdue" in view of the increasingly competitive environment in which the laboratories have to operate? Given what we now know, was not the Lord Advocate, in responding for the Home Secretary in the other place in February, wholly ill-advised to claim that there was "no necessity" for improving the regulation of the laboratories? What does he say now to the calls from Lord Dainton and the Lord Chief Justice? Is not the Royal Society of Chemistry right that the case for the establishment of such a body is unanswerable? Is not the Secretary of State directly and personally responsible for the failure to act on the recommendations made to him?

On the report that the Secretary of State published yesterday, is it not extraordinary that

"the history of this centrifuge"

is not known with certainty, that no one has so far been able to say from where it was purchased—second-hand—and that no proper records were kept of its cleaning? Will he say how long Professor Caddy's inquiry is likely to take, whether he is satisfied that all possible cases where the tests could have been contaminated have been identified, and how many defendants may be involved? Will he also accept that the scope of the inquiry must be widened so that once Professor Caddy has completed the most urgent task of investigating the consequences of this contamination, a much more extensive review must be undertaken into the working practices of all forensic science and explosive laboratories?

Does not the way in which the Secretary of State has handled this grave matter expose a disastrous combination of arrogance and ineptitude, sadly all too typical of the Government, which will make it more difficult properly to restore public confidence in the criminal justice system?

Mr. Howard: As to the oral statement, the full facts and the action being taken were set out in my written answer yesterday to a parliamentary question, and the forensic explosives laboratory report on the instance was yesterday placed in the Library of House. Until we have Professor Caddy's report, I can give no further information and we move increasingly into the realms of speculation without the facts.

I have absolutely no intention of following the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) into the realm of speculation which was the basis of every question that he put to me. My concern is to give Parliament and the public the facts, not to second-guess the independent reviewer whom I have appointed. I have asked Professor Caddy to report as soon as he can consistent with a rigorous, thorough and comprehensive report.

I shall deal with one or two of the other matters raised by the hon. Gentleman. My understanding is that it is not true that the press were briefed yesterday before the answer was made available to the House. My understanding is that the briefing commenced at 3.30 pm. That is the best of my understanding. That is what I have been told in answer to the questions which I have raised.

But the one thing above all which emerges from this regrettable incident and the way in which it has been handled by the hon. Gentleman and his cronies on the Opposition Front Bench is that they will stop at nothing to try to make political capital out of any incident. It is a disgraceful approach to serious matters of this kind and it will do the hon. Gentleman and his reputation no good whatever.

Sir Ivan Lawrence (Burton): I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend on the prompt and thorough action that he has taken in this serious matter. Will he confirm that, of the dozen or so cases concerned where Semtex formed an important part of the evidence, the majority of those cases had evidence other than Semtex to be seriously considered and, therefore, it becomes less likely that in those cases the persons concerned will be released?

Finally, is it not preposterous for the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) to suggest that had there been an independent forensic council it would have detected at Sevenoaks some contamination of a rubber bung at the bottom of a test tube upon which some of the equipment had rested? The whole thing is preposterous. The Opposition are trying to make a mountain out of a very small molehill and are discredited by the stupidity of their attempt.

Mr. Howard: I hope that my hon. and learned Friend will forgive me, but I do not propose to confirm the point that he put to me as to whether there was other evidence in the cases that we have so far identified as candidates for further investigation because I do not wish to engage in any speculation on any of those questions. I have asked Professor Caddy to look at them, but until we have his report the least said about any of the cases the better. I can confirm to my hon. and learned Friend that, so far as I can see at the moment, he is right in saying that the establishment of a forensic science advisory council would not have had the slightest bearing on this regrettable incident. But on that too, a final view must await Professor Caddy's report.

Mr. Alex Carlile (Montgomery): For how long was the Home Office aware of the information that was revealed yesterday before it was put in the public domain? Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman confirm that in the Forensic Science Service, equipment is tested and quality-assured in a way which enables the records of all the equipment that is used for forensic testing to be traced? Will he further confirm that in the Forensic Science Service, no analytical results are relied upon unless blank tests have been carried out first? When outside laboratories are used—as was the case here—why are the Forensic Science Service's high standards of checking apparently not used? Will he assure the House that, in future, the Forensic Science Service will be able to set the standards used by outside laboratories before analytical results from those laboratories are used in evidence?

Mr. Howard: Let me first deal with the sequence of events. The preliminary results were reported to the Home Office by the forensic explosives laboratory on 19 April

in a draft report. The final report was formally submitted to the Home Office on 25 April. I was fully briefed on the matter on 26 April, although I had been given a general oral account of the discovery on 22 April. In conjunction with my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for Defence, I then considered what action should be taken. It obviously takes a little time to decide upon the form of inquiry that is appropriate, and to identify and approach the person who is best qualified to carry it out. When that process was complete, I brought the matter to the House. I simply do not see how I could possibly have acted more expeditiously. I believe that I accounted to Parliament at the earliest possible moment.

The hon. and learned Member for Montgomery (Mr. Carlile) referred to the Forensic Science Service, but was not gracious enough to apologise to the service for his intemperate attack on it on the "PM" programme yesterday. He either had not read the written answer before he went on that programme—it was available for a full hour and a half before he made the broadcast—or, having read it, he had not understood it. The hon. and learned Gentleman is wont to make wild accusations without the slightest evidence to support them in a way which brings himself and his party into increasing disrepute. He should apologise to the Forensic Science Service at the earliest possible moment.

Mr. Ray Whitney (Wycombe): Will my right hon. and learned Friend confirm that as soon as the laboratory discovered the contamination of the equipment, that equipment was taken out of service and an investigation was commenced immediately? Does he agree that the answers to questions such as that are important, and not the characteristically synthetic indignation of the Opposition?

Mr. Howard: I agree with my hon. Friend that that is an important point, and I can confirm exactly what he said. The piece of equipment was taken out of action as soon as the matter was discovered.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): May I ask the Home Secretary a question of which I gave his private office notice? Are there any implications for the Lockerbie situation? In particular, will Professor Brian Caddy—who some of us know to be a distinguished forensic scientist in Scotland—be specifically asked either by the Home Office or by the Crown Office to look at the crucial work of Dr. Hayes and Dr. Fereday, as that is central to the Lockerbie situation? Will he give that undertaking? He could easily say yes.

Mr. Howard: It would not be remotely appropriate for me to give any such undertaking. Professor Caddy, to whom the hon. Gentleman has just paid such fulsome tribute, is in an excellent position to decide what material he needs to look at, whose opinions he needs to consult and what investigations he needs to carry out. That is why I have appointed him to carry out the scrutiny.

Mr. Spencer Batiste (Elmet): Having a forensic laboratory in my constituency and having visited it a number of times and seen the range and excellence of its work, may I ask my right hon. and learned Friend to dissociate himself from the Opposition's attacks on the forensic service? Will he also pay tribute to the dedication and commitment of the many people who work in it to underpin our justice system?

Mr. Howard: My hon. Friend is right. It would be quite wrong, as I have repeatedly said, to rush to any premature conclusions before we have the results of Professor Caddy's work. There is no evidence so far to indicate that any prosecution has been flawed by evidence contaminated in the way that has been the subject of such widespread speculation. But it is important that no stone be left unturned in the investigation, which is what I have asked Professor Caddy to do.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Is the Home Secretary aware that, quite apart from the individuals concerned, there is bound to be international concern about these cases? Time and again when trying to deal with terrorism, which causes so much suffering and destruction, it is unfortunately the British criminal justice system that seems to be on the defensive. That does this country great discredit abroad. All in all, has this not been a bad day for justice?

Mr. Howard: If any concern has been caused abroad, it is much more likely to have resulted from the hysterical attitude of the Opposition parties than from the fact that the Government have, in public and at the earliest possible moment, said that we have found something worthy of investigation and that we will have it thoroughly and independently investigated.

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that a democratic criminal justice system, even if it has faults, is infinitely preferable to a terrorist system of summary executions in which all the victims are innocent and no victim has a chance of repeal or review before being murdered?

Mr. Howard: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, who makes his point with characteristic vigour.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Kingston upon Hull, North): I do not think that it is the Home Secretary 's role, or that of his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence, to examine test tubes in forensic laboratories—although that might be a suitable occupation for them after the general election. Nor do I have any criticism of the arrangements that the Government have made, apart from the fact that they failed to make a statement to the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw)—shortly to be my right hon. Friend—had to ask a private notice question to elicit the information.

What I am worried about is the role of Professor Caddy. The Home Secretary seemed to say that the onus would be on the professor to recommend cases for examination on the basis of his inquiries. Surely the right hon. and learned Gentleman's duty is to inform the legal representatives of anyone convicted, however remotely, by forensic evidence of the presence of Semtex. Thereafter the onus should be on the legal representatives to make representations and force the Home Secretary to take the cases to the Court of Appeal.

Mr. Howard: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right. We have already made it abundantly clear that we intend to do precisely that. Once it has been identified that there is some evidence that could have been contaminated in a particular case, the solicitors for the defendant concerned will be notified as soon as the information is available.

[Mr. Howard]

Then the question of whether any such cases should be referred to the Court of Appeal will arise. In taking that decision I and—no doubt—the Criminal Cases Review Commission, once it is fully in operation, will place great significance on the work of Professor Caddy. I believe that we intend to approach the matter in precisely the way the hon. Gentleman suggests we should.

Mr. Jacques Arnold (Gravesham): Is it not a bizarre spectacle to see Opposition spokesmen leaping on 30 millionths of one gram of Semtex on the off-chance of hitting my right hon. and learned Friend over the head with it? Is it not irresponsible that that political action may put at risk the convictions of terrorist murderers?

Mr. Howard: There is no limit, as we have seen yet again today, to the irresponsibility of the Labour party, but it is something that we have become well used to.

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): Does the Home Secretary understand that it is extremely important to clarify which cases will be reviewed so that the speculation about the rights of appeal can be ended fairly quickly? In that context, does he recall that, on 31 August last year, I referred in some detail to him the case of my constituent John Kinsella, who was convicted of involvement in the Warrington bombings, despite the fact that he has never been owned by the IRA, his involvement has been denied by one of the self-confessed bombers and his conviction was based only on his handling of a holdall in which the bombers had concealed the Semtex? Will John Kinsella's case be one of those that has been referred for review?

Mr. Howard: I will not indicate the cases, because we do not yet have the information that we need to do so definitively. Of course I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is important that the matter is clarified as soon as possible and that the cases are identified as soon as possible, and I hope that we shall be able to do so quickly. As for the case to which he referred, the material that he submitted to me in relation to that case is currently being studied.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Mid–Staffordshire): Has my right hon. and learned Friend been told by his Home Office scientific advisers that any contaminant in a centrifuge is highly unlikely to get in contact with anything being tested in an encapsulated test tube? Does he not find it extraordinary that the person who purports to be the shadow Home Secretary finds people guilty first and innocent later?

Mr. Howard: My hon. Friend has extremely accurately characterised the findings of the preliminary report. That is exactly what that report says, but it goes on to say that it would be prudent and responsible to commission a further independent inquiry, and I have done precisely that. I entirely agree with the points made by my hon. Friend.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey): In the light of cases such as those of the Guildford Four, the Birmingham Six and the Maguire Seven, surely the Home Secretary realises the sensitivity of these issues. When will he stop blaming the Opposition for the incompetence in his Department and take some responsibility for those areas that he purports to be in charge of?

Mr. Howard: What I blame the Opposition for is the hysteria with which they have approached this whole matter, the unnecessary alarm that they have caused by engendering and fuelling speculation about specific cases and the disgraceful way in which the hon. Member for Blackburn identified about a dozen realms of speculation in which he invited me to join him this afternoon.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): The way in which my right hon. and learned Friend has dealt with this matter so far has been exemplary. *[Laughter]* Does it not amount to this—that Professor Caddy is an acknowledged expert in his field, he is carrying out on independent inquiry, and he will have full access to all the information and records? Unless Opposition Members are seriously suggesting that the Home Secretary should personally check every glass test tube in use in a process like this, there is nothing for which he should be reproached.

Mr. Howard: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and I agree with the points that he made. No suggestion made by the Opposition would surprise me. I should not be at all surprised if they did think that I should check every test tube personally.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Has not it crossed the Minister's slippery mind that the public are getting more than a little weary of Governments blaming the Opposition for the Scott report, for BSE, and now for this, and throwing in a few scientists and blaming them at the same time? Should not he be big enough, now and again, to carry the can? He is the Minister; he is in government. He has been in court more often than anyone else in Britain. He is a recidivist, and it is time that he resigned.

Mr. Howard: As it happens, I am not the Minister who is ultimately responsible for the agency. I am answering this question because that agency, which is a Ministry of Defence agency, was carrying out work under contract for the Home Office, and I am interested in the implications for the cases where there just may have been some information affecting the verdict of the jury in those cases. I am concerned about that. That is why I have come to the House. That is why I, together with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence, have commissioned this independent scrutiny. We have done exactly what we should have done in these circumstances.

Ms Jean Corston (Bristol, East): Given that the Home Office knew about the contamination on 15 March—as the Minister has just told us—can the Home Secretary explain why the information has not been made public until now?

Mr. Howard: If the hon. Lady had listened to my answer to the question asked by the hon. and learned Member for Montgomery (Mr. Carlile), she would have realised that what she has just said is arrant nonsense. Moreover—if she had got the date right, which she did not—she would have heard a full answer to her own question.

Mr. Michael Stephen (Shoreham): My right hon. and learned Friend will know that samples of blood or urine taken from persons suspected of drunken driving are divided into two parts. One part is analysed on behalf of

the prosecution, while the other is given to the defence so that it can be subjected to independent analysis if the defence so wishes. Will my right hon. and learned Friend look into whether a similar procedure is used, or should be used, in the case of other criminal offences, especially those involving the handling of explosives?

Mr. Howard: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. I shall see that it is drawn to the attention of Professor Caddy.

Mr. Max Madden (Bradford, West): At least 12 convictions may be declared unsafe as a result of the Home Secretary's statement today. Will he ensure that he makes a statement to the House at the earliest opportunity—certainly before the summer recess—identifying the specific cases concerned? I hope that, if he can do nothing else, this sorry episode will provide conclusive evidence enabling him to make a decision about the remaining prisoners, who have now been waiting for seven months to be repatriated to prisons in the Irish Republic. I hope that he will make that decision today: it would provide some recompense for the extraordinary dilatoriness that he has shown so far in regard to this urgent matter.

Mr. Howard: I find it impossible to follow what passes for logic in the hon. Gentleman's question. There is absolutely no connection between one matter and another.

Points of Order

Mr. Brian H. Donohoe (Cunninghame, South): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I have given notice of my intention to raise with you a matter of major concern. I understand that you have copies of the offending material to which I shall refer.

At 4.40 pm yesterday I received a call from my local newspaper, the *Irvine Times*, asking me to comment on answers given to questions raised by me about the Irvine development corporation's housing transfer. I had been given only a holding answer, dated 13 May, which I supplied to you. The local paper, however, had been faxed full answers. You must understand, Madam Speaker, that this is a highly critical period. The housing stock is being transferred from the development corporation, and tenants are shortly to be balloted on whether they want their new landlord. Moreover, as the local paper's deadline was yesterday evening, I have no chance of putting my case to the local people.

I feel that you, Madam Speaker, must condemn what I would describe as disgraceful action on the part of the Under–Secretary of State for Scotland, and call him to the House to explain his conduct. After all, he has withheld information from the House and from me in particular.

Madam Speaker: The Minister is present to give an explanation, and I appreciate his presence.

The Parliamentary Under–Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. George Kynoch): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. The information came to my attention less than two hours ago: that was the first that I had heard of it. I understand that information was released to the media without the authority of any Minister, and I have asked the permanent secretary at the Scottish Office for an urgent inquiry into how the administrative error occurred. I apologise to you, Madam Speaker, and to the hon. Member for Cunninghame, South (Mr. Donohoe). No discourtesy was intended, and I will get to the bottom of the matter.

Madam Speaker: This should not have happened. The hon. Gentleman has been given an apology and assured of a full explanation as soon as an inquiry has been carried out, which I appreciate.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (Colchester, North): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. You have often admonished hon. Members for visiting other hon. Members' constituencies without their consent. Could you take action against the hon. Member for Cunninghame, North (Mr. Wilson) who, this morning, visited my constituency for a futile, anti-Government media stunt, at the expense of me and my constituents, entirely without my consent?

Madam Speaker: I have no authority to take action against any hon. Member. I have merely made a plea, on numerous occasions across the Floor of the House, for hon. Members to give notification. The matter should be resolved between hon. Members; after the numerous statements that I have made on the matter, it should never come to the Chair of the House. It is a petty matter, although I understand that it is irritating to hon. Members

[Madam Speaker]

when other hon. Members appear in their constituencies without their knowledge. Hon. Members should give notification of such visits, if only as a matter of courtesy.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: I have no further comments on that point of order.

Mr. Skinner: It is a different one.

Madam Speaker: In that case, I shall hear it, but it must be a different one.

Mr. Skinner: I read in the paper today that the Government have put up a poster in Vauxhall, in Lambeth—over the bridge—saying that although it has hurt, supposedly it is now working. That constituency does not belong to John Major or the Chancellor of the Exchequer or any of those on the Treasury Bench. I do not think that they ever tell the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Miss Hoey) what they are doing.

Madam Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is fully aware that that is not a point of order for me. I have not seen the poster, but I shall make a point of doing so during my walk tomorrow morning.

National Savings Pension

4.11 pm

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision in respect of national savings schemes to enable persons to have an income in retirement.

The long title explains the Bill's purpose, but it is customary for hon. Members to take a few minutes to explain the measure to the House.

This century, this country has made some major advances in extending pension coverage. There is a state retirement pension and, in addition, many employers have extended occupational pension coverage to their employees. But it was apparent, long before this Government's recent initiatives, that occupational pension coverage has stopped short at coverage of about 50 per cent. of the population. Despite the last Labour Government's attempts to gain universal coverage through the state earnings-related pension scheme, large numbers of people remained outside a second pension coverage. Even with this Government's personal pensions measures, a growing proportion of the working population is not covered by either the state retirement pension or a second pension. My modest Bill does not aim to tackle that major problem; I hope that, at some stage, the House will deal with it. The debate is between those who believe that we shall gain coverage on a voluntary principle and those of us who believe that we shall need an increasing element of compulsion.

The Bill makes a simple amendment to the National Savings Bank Act 1971 so that the Post Office can do two things. First, it can sell index-linked, inflation-proof bonds to those people who wish to save towards their retirement in that way. Secondly, the Post Office can, for those who wish, sell bonds that are linked to share issues and merely track the FT index. There will be two ways for individuals to save simply and cheaply.

When considering the cost of pension proposals, it is well worth looking at the cost of national savings generally, which charge, in administrative terms, only 0.5 per cent. of the cost of the savings themselves.

The Bill is a modest measure. It aims to help those on low incomes and on fluctuating incomes so that at their convenience they can make regular or irregular contributions towards their pension retirement savings. As I have said, the measure itself will not solve the problem of the growing number of people who do not have even state pension coverage, let alone occupational or personal pension coverage. However, it gives a resounding vote of support to the millions of our fellow citizens who wish to provide for themselves in retirement rather than rely on means-tested assistance. With that theme in mind I hope that the House will give me leave to introduce the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Frank Field, Mr. Stephen Day, Ms Angela Eagle, Mr. Clifford Forsythe, Miss Kate Hoey, Mr. Alan Howarth, Mrs. Jane Kennedy and Mr. David Shaw.

NATIONAL SAVINGS PENSION

Mr. Frank Field accordingly presented a Bill to make provision in respect of national savings schemes to enable persons to have an income in retirement: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon Friday 12 July and to be printed. [Bill 131.]

Common Agricultural Policy

[Relevant documents: The Fourteenth and Eighteenth Reports of the Select Committee on European Legislation, Session 1995-96 (House of Commons Paper No. 51-xiv and House of Commons Paper No. 51-xviii); European Community Document No. 5215/96, relating to agricultural prices for 1996-97; the unnumbered Explanatory Memorandum submitted by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on 3rd May 1996 relating to supplementary premium payable to sheep producers in non-Less Favoured Areas of Ireland and the United Kingdom in respect of Northern Ireland; the report by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the Scottish Office Agriculture, Environment and Fisheries Department, the Northern Ireland Department for Agriculture and the Welsh Office on Agriculture in the United Kingdom 1995; European Community Documents Nos. 7015/95, relating to agrimonetary reform; 9061/95, relating to agrimonetary compensation; national aids; 9270/95, relating to controls in the wine sector 1992-94; 10479/95, the Court of Auditors' special report on the sheep and goat régime; 11896/95, the financial report of the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund Guarantee Section for 1994; 12476/95, relating to agrimonetary compensation; and 4322/96, the Court of Auditors' special report on agricultural expenditure in Portugal 1988-93.]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Streeter.]*

Mr. Harry Barnes (North–East Derbyshire): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. This morning in Standing Committee A, the eight documents that are now in front of us in relation to the debate were debated, and a motion was carried that will later be brought before the House. An amendment to that will be tabled, upon which we will be able to vote. Will we have the opportunity to vote on that at the end of today's debate, or will a vote be taken tomorrow at 10 o'clock? The minutes of this morning's Committee sitting will eventually be produced, but it would be helpful to have them available for hon. Members tomorrow when today's debate continues.

Madam Speaker: If the Government choose to put down a motion tomorrow, of course it can be disposed of and voted upon, but it is a matter for the Government.

Mr. Barnes: Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Order. There can be nothing further to the point of order. If the Government move a motion tomorrow, the House can vote on it. It can be disposed of tomorrow—if it is moved.

4.16 pm

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Douglas Hogg): In past years, the annual debate on agriculture has occupied one day and has focused on the year's price-fixing proposals. This year, because of the surrounding circumstances, the debate will last two days and will be more general. Moreover, on Monday there was a specific opportunity to discuss the cull cow slaughter scheme, and earlier today the details of this year's price-fixing proposals were considered in Standing

[Mr. Douglas Hogg]

Committee A. I cannot think of a previous occasion on which agricultural issues have been the subject of such extensive parliamentary scrutiny and concern.

In the course of a two-day debate, many subjects will be raised. My hon. Friends the Minister of State and the Parliamentary Secretaries will seek to respond to detailed points in their winding-up and other speeches. In opening, I wish to focus on three subjects: first, our approach to the common agricultural policy; secondly, our view of the price-fixing proposals; and, thirdly, the present state of the beef sector.

Before I develop these themes, I will put the present problems into their proper context. Until eight weeks ago, I was accustomed to saying that now is a particularly fortunate time to be the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. That was true, and in most respects it remains true. Over the past four years, British agriculture has seen a 70 per cent. real increase in its prosperity. There are a number of reasons for that increase: currency movements and world commodity prices have played an important part, as have lower interest and inflation rates—both the direct and intended consequence of Government policy. As an industry, British farming is as competitive and prosperous as any in Europe, and it is our duty to help it remain so. One cannot refer to agriculture without speaking about the common agricultural policy.

Mr. Robert Hughes (Aberdeen, North): Does the Minister agree that the agricultural industry encompasses people and trades other than those who are purely farmers? I refer to the dire circumstances as a result of bovine spongiform encephalopathy, and to the compensation that is being offered.

What does the Minister have to say to people such as John Troup in Aberdeen, who received a fax from the Scottish Office and was told to cease trading forthwith? He trades in ox heads. His business has gone, his employees are unemployed, and he has been told that no compensation will be made available. The Minister cannot speak about agriculture without recognising the different elements involved. When will he discuss compensation for these sorts of people?

Mr. Hogg: I have already said that I will address three matters, the last of which is the present state of the beef sector. If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I shall continue my speech, and address his comments at the appropriate time.

As I was saying, one cannot talk about British agriculture without referring to the common agricultural policy, which most hon. Members will agree is in grave need of reform. The CAP is expensive, it imposes restrictions on production, it is bureaucratic, it hinders the development of new markets, and it stands as an obstacle to the successful enlargement of the European Union. These are powerful arguments for change.

We want a market-driven agricultural policy that involves progressive reductions in price and production-related support and that does not involve quotas on production. In short, we wish to see an agricultural industry that is ready and able to produce what markets want at prices that they can afford.

Such a shift in policy requires gradual introduction, because farmers need time to adjust. Transitional financial assistance will be necessary. However, it is important that such payments should be degressive and decoupled from production. Such reform should also address more fully and directly environmental and rural objectives, some of which are clearly reflected in our countryside stewardship scheme.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): Will my right hon. and learned Friend add another attribute for which we should be working in the reform of the common agricultural policy—that is, honesty? British farmers are the most honest farmers in Europe, but they have to deal in a market with farmers who are less scrupulous, and with a system that is apparently easy to manipulate and gives rise to a level of unacceptable fraud.

Mr. Hogg: My hon. Friend's comments are of great substance. We should move away from the present systems of support, partly because they give rise to the possibility of fraud. The more market-driven concepts that we envisage expose us to a lower risk of fraud than the present regime.

I have outlined the essential elements that I believe the common agricultural policy should contain. I do not pretend that the majority of Europe's Agriculture Ministers share that view. However, important external pressures will drive the European Union in the direction that I have sketched out. The most notable are the general agreement on tariffs and trade ceilings on subsidised exports, and the World Trade Organisation talks, due to start in only three years, which are bound to result in greater liberalisation of world trade and in further reductions in subsidy payments.

Moreover, the process of enlarging the European Union should present an opportunity for further reform. I do not believe that Europe could afford to apply an unreformed agricultural policy to new entrants, and I do not think that partial application of the existing agricultural policy would be sustainable. Those are uncomfortable facts for many member states, and they will be resisted. However, there is increasing recognition of the need for such change. I welcome the Commission's White Paper of last November. The British Government agree with most of the document's analysis, and we greatly welcome its conclusion that the status quo cannot be maintained.

Progress in securing change will be slow, and it will be attended by procrastination and compromise. However, I have sketched out realistic objectives that are right for both British farmers and the consumers and taxpayers of Europe.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): Why must the process be so slow? The Government have been in power for 17 years, and the common agricultural policy remains totally unacceptable to the taxpayers of this country, including many farmers. It is almost as unacceptable as the behaviour of the Secretary of State for Health, who destabilised and destroyed Britain's beef market by running into the Chamber and causing a crisis.

Mr. Hogg: That intervention shows how unfit the Labour party is for government. The Leader of the Opposition has said several times that the Labour party would not wish to stand alone in Europe.

Let us consider for a moment the practicalities of reforming the common agricultural policy. We must arrive at some agreement within the Council, which has

15 voting members. We are arguing for change, but, as I have said, the majority is against us at present. If the hon. Member were to assert to the Council that his could never be the minority view, the majority would always be against us. That sort of thinking highlights why the Labour party is unfit for office.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): Do not my right hon. and learned Friend's comments prove that any vote that is taken in the House tomorrow will be entirely symbolic? Whether the Government win or lose the vote, the common agricultural policy will continue in its present form until Ministers reform it.

Mr. Hogg: My point is that our objectives are realistic. We are making substantial progress, but it is slow—I do not deny that. For example, agreements were struck in 1992. My right hon. Friend the present Secretary of State for the Environment played an important part in securing a package of measures that advanced reform while taking account of British farmers' interests.

As I said, the Commission's White Paper published at the end of last year is an important step forward, in that it asserts the principle that the status quo in common agricultural policy terms is not sustainable. We need to build on that and to work with the grain of that argument. I hope that my hon. Friend will help to make that possible.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Does the Minister agree that progress in the direction that he has set forth would be better if it were not for the fact that half his party want us out of Europe?

Mr. Hogg: That is manifestly not true, but, if the hon. Gentleman were honest with himself, he would recognise that a large number of Labour Members regard his political views as positively eccentric. I am bound to say that I rather agree with them.

Mr. Tony Marlow (Northampton, North): As my name and those of several of my colleagues have been taken in vain by the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), may I make it clear that I do not know any Conservative Member who wants to come out of Europe; perhaps there are one or two. Many Conservative Members believe that we should have major renegotiations; that, I believe, is the Government's position as well. We are bored rigid with being misrepresented by people such as the hon. Member for Rotherham.

Mr. Hogg: I am glad that I gave my hon. Friend the opportunity to clarify his position so precisely.

Mr. Rhodri Morgan (Cardiff, West): Give him a job.

Mr. Hogg: That is not in my discretion.

I will turn from the general thoughts that I have tried to sketch out on the CAP to this year's price proposals, which were examined this morning in European Standing Committee A. In essence, the price proposals maintain the status quo. They disappoint, because we have, and yet have missed, an opportunity for change. With cereal prices at their present high levels, now would have been the time to start cutting the arable area payments, which massively over-compensate for the price reductions agreed in 1992.

Moreover, the milk sector is another area in which we could have made changes. I pressed for a 1 per cent. increase in milk quotas, together with a 5 per cent. cut in support prices. I am sorry that those suggestions were not picked up. Some proposals, however, should most certainly be welcomed. In particular, there is the proposal for a single rate for rotational and non-rotational set-aside. That is a much-needed and wholly justified simplification of the rules.

The Council will need to take an early decision on next year's set-aside rate. I hope that that can be done at the July Council. As to the rate itself, with current high market prices, there are powerful arguments for a rate substantially below 10 per cent.

I turn to the beef sector. The "price proposals" will provide additional measures to support the beef sector in and through the present crisis. Some measures have already been taken, but the Council has, on two occasions, emphasised the need for additional short-term income support for beef producers. We and other member states look to the Commission to deliver further proposals at next week's Council meeting.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough and Horncastle): May I direct my right hon. and learned Friend to a point of interest for his constituents and for mine in Lincolnshire? At present, not a single beast is going into market from Lincolnshire because, east of the line from Northampton to York, no abattoirs are open for those beasts. There is chaos. We have been lobbied today by more than 100 or 200 farmers. They cannot get beasts into market. There are not enough abattoirs. What is my right hon. and learned Friend going to do about it?

Mr. Hogg: There is a serious problem with matching abattoirs to renderers. Rendering capacity in this country is finite, and we are having difficulties in processing or slaughtering more than 25,000 cattle a week throughout the United Kingdom. To meet that problem, we are proposing to take on cold storage facilities. In the next six weeks or so, I hope that we shall take on additional storage capacity for about 20,000 tonnes. At that point, it will be possible to bring more abattoirs on stream, and there will therefore be a bigger throughput than we can achieve at the moment.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): May I point out to my right hon. and learned Friend that not only Lincolnshire farmers have been to the House today? Staffordshire farmers have been here as well, and they will not be comforted by the six-week period. I stress to my right hon. and learned Friend that it is absolutely essential that the six weeks becomes two as a maximum.

Mr. Hogg: My hon. Friend the Minister of State has reminded me that more abattoirs will come on stream on Monday week.

I invite my hon. Friends to stand back for a moment. We face a real problem because there is a constraint—the rendering capacity. One cannot wholly get round that problem by putting carcases into cold storage, because, in any event, between 30 and 40 per cent. of the carcases have to be rendered. That said, as we are able to bring more cold storage into play, we shall be able to increase substantially the weekly slaughter rate. I recognise the considerable concern expressed by hon. Members of all parties on that point.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): Today, Devonshire farmers have been saying to Members of Parliament who represent Devon constituencies that cold storage is the key. They will expect to hear not six weeks but a great deal less than that. The relationship between the renderers and abattoirs is understood, but will my right hon. and learned Friend be able to do anything about the supermarkets that have been telling abattoirs, "If you take inedible food as well edible food, we will not take any supplies from you at all." That is specifically making it virtually impossible for the renderers to do their job.

Mr. Hogg: The points that my hon. Friend has made are important. We shall start the process of bringing cold storage on stream next Tuesday. I thought that it would be more helpful if I expressed the figure collectively, so that hon. Members got a feel for the number. That is why I said 20,000 tonnes at the end of six weeks. I hoped that it would be a helpful indication of the volume.

The point about abattoirs and supermarkets is serious. My hon. Friend the Minister of State has talked to the industry many, many times—indeed, on a daily basis—and at the moment, nobody has dropped out of the abattoir scheme for the reasons that my hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) has just given about the supermarkets.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Hogg: I shall give way to my hon. Friend the Member for West Gloucestershire (Mr. Marland), then the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), and then I must make a little progress.

Mr. Paul Marland (West Gloucestershire): As has already been said, a large delegation of farmers visited the House of Commons today, and several of my hon. Friends and I were at a well-attended meeting upstairs with them to discuss the situation. They brought up the considerable concern about the unexpectedly large drop in the price of clean beef. I understand that that is in no small measure due to imports from third countries. Will my right hon. and learned Friend undertake to consider the possibility of stopping imports from countries such as Botswana, which were allowed into this country only as a short-term measure to plug the gap created as a result of the scare?

Mr. Hogg: I should like to make two points. First, to return to a point that I made a few moments ago about income support for beef producers, I think that the Commission is likely to come forward at next week's meeting of the Council with proposals for additional income support that will address some of the points that concern my hon. Friend and his constituents.

Secondly, however, there is a broader point, which relates to third countries. Some weeks ago, we relaxed the prohibition on the importation into the United Kingdom of beef older than 30 months from some third countries in which there was no risk of BSE. We did that to meet the legitimate concern of UK food processors, who made it plain to me and to others that they would face grave economic difficulties if they were not able to obtain supplies of that type of meat from third world countries. That is why we did it, and I am not minded to go back on that decision.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Is it true that it is now exactly eight weeks since the Secretary of State for Health made his original statement in the House that precipitated this crisis? That is 56 days. Why was the problem of rendering capacity not anticipated at a much earlier stage? Why has the entire industry been held to ransom?

Why is the situation still deteriorating—since last week, when the Minister of State made his statement, and since Monday, when he assured us that 21 abattoirs were in action? Today, only 11 are operating. Can the Secretary of State give us a figure for the number of cattle that have been processed through the scheme as of now?

Mr. Hogg: The hon. Gentleman reminds the House that it is but eight weeks since my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and I made our statements. It seems like eight years from my point of view and that of the industry, but no matter for that.

There has not been a deterioration in the situation. The 30-month scheme is running, and it is running effectively. We hope—*[Interruption.]* No. Very soon we hope to be up to the rate of 18,000 cattle slaughtered a week in England and Wales in the categories about which we are now talking. We cannot do much in excess of that until we have brought on stream substantially more cold storage capacity to store the carcases.

Mr. Michael Lord (Central Suffolk): Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hogg: No; I shall now make some progress. I shall give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk (Mr. Lord) in a few moments, and then to the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley).

I turn now specifically to BSE. The Government's first and paramount duty—the one with which my Ministry is charged to perform—is to ensure the safety of the food we produce and the products we consume. I take this opportunity again to state my settled conviction that British beef is safe, and that it can be eaten with complete confidence. No other country in Europe or in the world can point to such sophisticated and elaborate systems that have been designed to deliver a quality product.

The key decision, taken following consultation with the producers and the retail industry, was to keep out of the food chain beef from cattle over the age of 30 months. One reason for that is that confirmed cases in cattle under the age of 30 months are virtually unknown. That, combined with a vigorous enforcement of the slaughterhouse rules, provides for a very high degree of consumer protection.

There are, however, many specialist beef herds that have never had a case of BSE, and, because of the circumstances in which they are raised, are very unlikely ever to have one. Some of those cattle are normally marketed over 30 months of age. To take account of that, we are now consulting on a change that will permit beef from those animals back into the market for human consumption. That is a necessary and a justified step, but it is a step that requires special consideration; hence the importance that I attach to consultation and to the views of the Commission. I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk.

Mr. Lord: I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend for giving way. His remarks about help for prime beef under 30 months old will be greatly welcomed by Suffolk farmers. May I echo other hon. Members' concern about slaughtering, because I do not think that one abattoir in Norfolk or Suffolk is working? In fact, I believe that just one abattoir in East Anglia, at Brentwood—*[Interruption.]*—I hope that my right hon. and learned Friend will listen—is working. Today, my farmers impressed on me the need to get the slaughtering operation under way as quickly as possible, to restore confidence in the market and to let them know what is going on.

I urge my right hon. and learned Friend to improve his communications with our farmers so that they know what is going on, when their animals can be expected to be slaughtered and when they will receive their money.

Mr. Hogg: Both the points that my hon. Friend has made are, in principle, entirely justified. We were anxious to get the system under way as speedily as possible, but I have already drawn attention to the restriction imposed by the limitation on the rendering capacity. That is why we started with a limited number of abattoirs operating under the scheme, but more will be joining it on Monday week. As we increase the cold storage capacity, we will be able to bring yet more abattoirs into operation under the scheme.

As to communication with the farming community, we have already sent out two news sheets, and we will do more of that. Of course it is important. My hon. Friend the Minister of State sees representatives of the industry every day, and I see representatives whenever they want. I believe that relations are very good, but we will obviously do our best to improve them in any way we sensibly can.

Mr. William Cash (Stafford) *rose—*

Rev. Ian Paisley *rose—*

Mr. Hogg: I give way to the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley).

Rev. Ian Paisley: I appreciate the Minister giving way, and remembering that Northern Ireland is still a part of the United Kingdom. May I say that I welcome most heartily his plans about immediate storage? Northern Ireland has immediate capacity for storage, so why cannot the slaughter happen there tomorrow? We have to slaughter 6,000 head of cattle every week, and we could proceed now because we have the storage. Can he give the green light to that slaughter, if I might use that term—*[Laughter]*—or perhaps an orange light would be better?

Mr. Hogg: I do not need any reminding, especially when the hon. Gentleman is in his place, that Northern Ireland is part of the Union. Speaking for myself, I am extremely glad it is, and I hope that it will remain so for as long as the House is in place.

Mr. Cash *rose—*

Mr. Hogg: I am answering the question from the hon. Member for North Antrim.

As regards the cull, in Northern Ireland, between 3 and 14 May, some 2,620 beasts were slaughtered. We estimate that, today, some 500 beasts will be slaughtered in Northern Ireland. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will take some reassurance from those figures.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Hogg: I will give way first to my right hon. Friend the Member for Honiton (Sir P. Emery) and to hon. Members on the Opposition Benches.

Sir Peter Emery (Honiton): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for giving way. Will he deal with two points that he has not addressed? First, in order to encourage the throughput through slaughterhouses, a massive amount of refrigerated storage is, of course, necessary, but will he also encourage the greater use of incineration, particularly in the west country, which has the required facilities? That would considerably assist the scheme.

Secondly, my right hon. and learned Friend has told the House that he believes that the scheme is working well, but the information that he is getting does not correspond with what the farming community is feeling. Would he therefore consider arranging for his Parliamentary Private Secretary or one of his officials to be in daily contact with the intervention board—

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cirencester and Tewkesbury): That is happening.

Sir Peter Emery: That may be so, but the information that that board is getting from the farmers and that which the board is giving the Minister is not the same. That information needs to be co-ordinated.

Mr. Hogg: It is perfectly true that, in the first few days after 29 April, we did not get the throughput that we would have liked. However, it is also true that, in recent days, there has been a substantial improvement in the number of beasts slaughtered under the scheme. My hon. Friend the Minister of State chairs a daily meeting with representatives of the relevant industries, and is therefore kept fully informed of the day-to-day facts. We have the slaughter figures on a daily basis. I have today's estimated slaughter figure in my hand—an estimated 4,173 beasts were slaughtered in the UK today. We take the figures on a daily basis.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): Has the Minister looked at the unemployment figures today? Scottish unemployment is rising, while UK unemployment is falling. Scottish unemployment is above the UK average, while it has previously been below it. That is not all due to BSE, but it underlines how critical the export market is to employment in Scotland—and that also applies to Northern Ireland. My constituents are practical and pragmatic. We want our beef back on European markets. We do not want to replay the battle of Trafalgar like the Secretary of State for Scotland.

Will the Minister give an undertaking that, if he is going to adopt a step-by-step approach, the case for Scotland and Northern Ireland will be considered at an early stage of the process, given the critical importance of exports to our economies?

Mr. Hogg: We are indeed proceeding in a step-by-step way. I had had it in mind that my speech should unfold in

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precisely that way. I shall shortly come to the question of relaxing the ban, and seek to address that point in that context.

Mr. George Foulkes (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley): With respect, I wonder whether the Minister really knows what is happening out in the country. One of the biggest problems is red tape. Cattle are being taken hundreds of miles only to be turned back because of technicalities. There is problem after problem with the red tape that was set up to discourage cattle from going into intervention store to stop a beef mountain developing. The Prime Minister promised to cut the red tape but nothing has been done. What is the Minister going to do about it?

Mr. Hogg: That criticism is not correct. It is true is that, until recently, we wanted to discourage people from putting beef into intervention. However, when the crisis occurred, the rules were relaxed substantially, the classes were opened up and we made changes in administration. If the hon. Gentleman has specific points that illustrate undue bureaucracy, I should be grateful if he would let me have them in writing, and we will consider what we can do to address them.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Will my right hon. and learned Friend comment briefly on beef cattle aged over 30 months—possibly those under three years—being allowed back into the food chain? That would reduce the pressure to destroy perfectly good beef. Secondly, beasts are being held on farms, and in Dorset they cannot be slaughtered but still need food. Will he consider opening up set-aside, so that those beasts can be fed? That would cost nothing, and would take some pressure off my farmers.

Mr. Hogg: My hon. Friend's point about set-aside is good. We are consulting the Commission about that. It is right to draw attention to the importance of certified herds. We put proposals out for consultation about 10 days ago, and I hope that we will complete that in a few days. We can then consider what the industry has said about that concept. I want to discuss it with the Commission, because it is better by far to proceed with its agreement. However, I understand the importance of the concept of certified herds as a route back into the human food chain for cattle over the age of 30 months.

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): The right hon. and learned Gentleman was challenged about imports from third countries. Why was such a relaxation of restrictions on imports necessary to supply that beef? Given the complete traceability of beef from Northern Ireland, and given our exports of some 54,000 tonnes of beef to Europe every year, was not beef of the required quality available in the United Kingdom? If there had been no relaxation, there would not have been a drop in the British beef market.

Mr. Hogg: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the improved traceability and record keeping in Northern Ireland, and that point is extremely well founded. But his conclusion in relation to imports from third countries is not correct. The processors needed beef of a certain age and character. They got that primarily, but not exclusively, from cull cows. They needed to get beef from elderly cows and that was best sourced from third countries. We therefore relaxed the import prohibition provided that those countries did not have confirmed cases of BSE.

Mr. Cash: Does my right hon. and learned Friend accept that Staffordshire farmers are having an extremely difficult time, that the slaughtering and abattoir facilities are simply not available under current plans, and that farmers are becoming extremely impatient about the lack of co-operation that is causing them so much difficulty? Has my right hon. and learned Friend heard of the suspicion that is growing that the renderers and those involved in the abattoir business may be so organising affairs as to ensure that they gain a significant advantage as against the free market in the cattle market auctions as the matter progresses and as we come out of the crisis?

Mr. Hogg: I understand the anxieties that have been expressed by my hon. Friend's constituents. The past eight weeks have been a calamity for the British beef industry and for British farmers. They are desperately worried, they want to move their cattle, they feel that they cannot feed them, they see substantial financial problems, and it is true that the slaughter scheme has moved forward less rapidly than we would have wished. But I hope that we will soon be slaughtering at the rate of 18,000 per week in England and Wales, and that, as we introduce more cold storage capacity, we shall significantly increase that figure.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): The Minister says that he is concerned, but does he have any idea how angry people feel after eight weeks of simply being told that the Government are still trying to get their act together? People want the ban lifted. How many weeks will it be before we even begin to obtain a reduction in the backlog? Does the Minister accept that, without that reduction, there is no chance of persuading Europe to lift the ban?

Mr. Hogg: I rather regret giving way to the hon. Gentleman, because that was a rather intemperate intervention.

Mr. George Walden (Buckingham): I should like to say something a little more helpful to my right hon. and learned Friend. There is a danger in the slaughtering operation of too many expectations being laid on my right hon. and learned Friend and the Government. What would my right hon. and learned Friend like to suggest to the NFU, the slaughterhouses and the renderers in terms of initiatives that they could take at local level, rather than simply expecting everything to be organised by the Government?

Mr. Hogg: My hon. Friend is entirely right. The Government can lay down general schemes, designate with the intervention board and others relevant abattoirs, markets and collection points, and make arrangements for payments and so on, but when it comes to the bilateral negotiations, which have to take place, with regard to the ordering of slaughter, in the end that has to be done locally between farmers, abattoirs and markets. Government do not have the mechanism effectively to organise the slaughter of individual beasts.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport) *rose—*

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow) *rose—*

Mr. Hogg: I am going to make some progress.

I recognise that, as a result of the crisis in the beef sector, many individuals and businesses have suffered greatly, and I have immense sympathy for them. But we cannot use public money simply to compensate for the loss of profit. We have therefore targeted resources on the critical links in the chain, so as to provide a breathing space during which the sector can adjust to the new market circumstances. To achieve this, we have committed around £1 billion in support of farmers, renderers, abattoirs and cutting plants.

I accept that many people have suffered loss for which they will receive no assistance. That is true, but to try to provide assistance to everybody who has suffered loss would be wholly outside the ability of this House or of the Government.

Mr. Robert Hughes *rose—*

Mr. Viggers: Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr. Hogg: No, I wish to make some progress. The hon. Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Hughes) referred to this matter in a previous debate.

There are others who have suffered loss—hauliers, processors, shops and retailers. I know perfectly well that people have lost their jobs, and I have the utmost sympathy for them—this is a beastly business. But we cannot pay money to everybody who has suffered loss. Therefore, we must define the principles on which we are to operate, and they are those that I have outlined to the House on this occasion and on others.

I turn next to the bans on the export of British beef and beef products. Of course most attention has been paid to the bans imposed by the European Union and by member states. However, we should not ignore the fact that other countries, outside the European Union, have also placed bans on British beef and products, and that some of these bans have been in place for a long time.

In our view, these bans have neither scientific nor, in the case of the European Union, legal justification—hence our determination to lodge a legal challenge under article 173 of the treaty—and should be lifted as speedily as possible. The oft-repeated statements by EU Agriculture Ministers that the bans are to reassure consumers in other European countries are not a proper or satisfactory explanation for policies so unjustified in their character and so injurious in their consequences.

The House will know that the European Union standing veterinary committee is today considering proposals brought forward by the Commission. These proposals would, if approved and subject to conditions, provide for a lifting of the European Union ban in respect of gelatin, tallow and semen. The Commission is clearly seeking to re-establish a single market in beef and beef products, and I welcome these proposals as an important—though modest—first step.

I hope that during today's debate, we will learn the outcome of the committee's discussions. I should, however, make one point clear in advance.

Today's meeting is not the make-or-break event described in some sections of the media. I very much hope that the proposals will be adopted. However, if they are not, the Commission is obliged to submit without delay a proposal to the Council. I can assure the House that, in that event, I would be pressing for the implementation of the Commission's proposals. A failure to make progress would seriously complicate the relations that exist between the United Kingdom and other member states.

Once these proposals are accepted, we shall look to the Commission to bring forward further measures that will provide for additional relaxations in the ban—for example, lifting the ban on exports to third countries and exempting certified herds. That would be of particular importance to Scotland and to Northern Ireland, as well as elsewhere in the UK. Our objective is to move as rapidly as we can to a total removal of what is, in our view, a wholly unjustified interference with the single market.

Mr. Dalyell: Before rational and possibly difficult decisions are made in this area, we should know what progress is being made in the basic science of the matter. I am told by Peter Wilson, the former head of the huge Bush complex, that very important work has been curtailed in the neuropathogens unit because the work has been done on hamsters, as there is insufficient money to experiment on big animals. It is tragic that such important work has been curtailed at this time.

What is happening in relation to the examination of prions? Some evidence is coming forward that it is not just a matter of the temperatures that food is subjected to, but the fats that may protect the prions. This is the root science of the matter. Until these matters are resolved, it may be difficult to persuade other countries to lift the bans.

Mr. Hogg: I make no complaint to the hon. Gentleman, but—if he will forgive me for saying so—his intervention sounded more like a speech. I have no doubt that he will be seeking to catch your eye, Madam Speaker, or that of your successor in the Chair during the next two days, and detailed points in response to the hon. Gentleman's questions will be made during the winding-up speeches.

I wish to refer to the discussion about the selective cull. Much of that discussion ignores the true nature of BSE. BSE is not a highly infectious disease like foot and mouth, which can be contained and eradicated by a slaughter policy. The cause of BSE lies in the feed that was fed to cattle. In 1988, by excluding the use of ruminant protein in cattle rations, we took the step that was necessary to eliminate the incidence of BSE in the national herd.

As a consequence, there has been a dramatic and continuing decline in the numbers of confirmed cases. The peak was reached in 1992, with a total of 36,681 confirmed cases. Last year, there were 14,062 confirmed cases. This year, we expect a further reduction of around 40 per cent., and the trend will continue until, by the end of the decade, the incidence in the national herd will be extremely low—probably in the region of 2,000 confirmed cases, although independent estimates suggest an even lower figure.

To reinforce the policy, and because we accept that some ruminant protein containing the infective agent must have been fed to cattle after 1988—hence those cases

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involving animals born after the ban—we have decided that, as from 29 March this year, there will be a total ban on the incorporation of mammalian protein into any rations for farm animals.

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman (Lancaster): Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr. Hogg: In a moment.

There can be no justification for the wholesale slaughter of UK cattle. Any selective cull needs to be proportionate in terms of benefit and risk and to be seen in the context of measures to lift the ban. To the best of our ability, we must ensure that a cull is targeted on those beasts that are most likely to develop BSE.

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman *rose—*

Mr. Hogg: I shall give way to my hon. Friend, but I am conscious that I have not yet given way to my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers). I shall do so in a moment.

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman: Has my right hon. and learned Friend seen the article in *The Veterinary Record* of 6 January 1990 which refers to a study of the inheritance of susceptibility to BSE, and not the inheritance of BSE itself? Has any further work been done in that area?

Mr. Hogg: Work has been done and is continuing on the possibility of vertical transmission, which I think is the point that my hon. Friend is making. We hope to be able to publish the results of that work at the end of the year. I am reluctant to authorise a break in the study earlier than was intended, because of the fear that that could invalidate the results.

Mr. Viggers: It is good of my right hon. and learned Friend to give way to me. He will know that I am worried about the headboning industry. Many parts of the meat industry can mitigate their losses or draw profit from other areas, but headboning tends to be a specialist industry in which people have borrowed money to meet European requirements. Now the industry has gone completely, because of Government regulation.

I am aware that my right hon. and learned Friend is relying on legal advice to say that no compensation is payable to headboners. I would ask him, however, whether that is fair.

Mr. Hogg: My hon. Friend has fought strenuously for the cause of his constituents, and has put their case with great eloquence. I have not found it easy to deal with, because it is perfectly true that people have been put out of business. It is equally true that Governments of all political complexions have done what I am doing. It is therefore important to adhere to precedent. My hon. Friend is right about the legal principle; I am most unwilling to depart from an established precedent, in spite of the eloquence with which my hon. Friend has argued this case.

The crisis in the beef industry has been a devastating blow, but concerned though we are about the plight of this sector, we must recognise, and take every opportunity to assert, that, over the past four years, British agriculture has experienced a remarkable improvement in its fortunes. Judged by any standards, the prosperity of British farming is soundly based.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hogg: I want to conclude with some final observations. My Department has two duties. Of course we fight for the interests of the British farmer and for those in related industries. Their concerns are our concerns, their interests are our responsibilities. We have an overriding and paramount obligation to every consumer, however, to the public and to all our fellow citizens. It is a duty to ensure the safety of the food we grow and the products we consume. No interest, no concern, and no obligation is greater than that.

5.11 pm

Dr. Gavin Strang (Edinburgh, East): It is regrettable that the House of Commons is being forced to hold its annual agriculture debate on a motion for the Adjournment of the House. The Government have driven a coach and horses through the procedures of the House. They have contravened the explicit recommendation of the Select Committee on European Legislation—that the common agricultural policy price proposals

"raise questions of considerable political importance"

and warrant

"an early debate by the House rather than by European Standing Committee A."

The Government have, therefore, prevented the House from expressing its views through amendments to a proper motion, and have prevented us from tabling amendments in relation to the beef crisis. We can only conclude that the Government were in real fear of amendments and the consequent Divisions that might have taken place. It is indeed ironic that the Government's divisions over Europe have led them to undermine the authority of the Houses of Parliament.

Of course we welcome the fact that the debate has been extended to two days—a fact of which the Minister made great play—but I put it to him that if the British Government told the British people that the general election campaign would be double its normal length but that there would not necessarily be a proper ballot at the end of it, the electorate would not think that the process of democracy had been adequately served.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): The hon. Gentleman should cut the lather and get to the point—which is that he would have made the same speech whatever motion had been tabled, so his objections are entirely bogus.

Dr. Strang: I have had the privilege of being a Member of this House for almost 26 years. One thing people learn in that time is that their real power in the House lies in their vote. We need to be able to vote on a meaningful motion, and we are being denied that opportunity.

Sir Roger Moate (Faversham) *rose—*

Dr. Strang: I may give way later. A great many people want to intervene, but I shall give way only on the big issues—and the big issue here is the beef crisis.

I was rather surprised to hear the Minister say that British agriculture is the most prosperous in the European Union. If he had said that before 20 March, I would not have queried it. The beef crisis, however, is likely to have an enormous impact on this country. I realise that beef prices are also depressed in other EU countries, not least in Germany, but there are huge knock-on effects in the United Kingdom—in the export industry, for example. Much of Northern Ireland's beef production is for export; the same applies to the north-east of Scotland. In England and Wales, too, there are herds and plants dedicated almost exclusively to the export market, so I find it hard to believe that British agriculture is the most prosperous in the Union.

Mr. Beggs: About 80 per cent. of beef production in Northern Ireland has to be exported. Instead of waiting for the Commission to come up with meagre proposals, should not the Minister take up the opportunity offered by quality assurance schemes in Scotland and traceability in Northern Ireland? Surely it would be better to save herds that have never had a case of BSE than to dump them in skips for rendering?

Dr. Strang: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point—and with some passion. I intend to return to the issue of traceability later in my speech. Northern Ireland produces high quality beef and its industry is geared to the export market. It has been very successful in recent years, so a great deal is at stake and I can well understand the hon. Gentleman's concern.

The Labour party's commitment to radical reform of the common agricultural policy is well known. We have reiterated it year in, year out in these debates. The Government have been in power for 17 years and have not made a single sustained effort to secure changes to the CAP. I remind the Minister of what the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) said when he was in the right hon. and learned Gentleman's post. Speaking in 1993, after the MacSharry changes that had been discussed in the Council in 1992, he told the House that the reformed common agricultural policy was

"designed on what Britain wanted."

In the CAP reform negotiations, he added,

"there was no single major element of our negotiating list that we failed to secure in those negotiations."—[*Official Report*, 25 March 1993; Vol.221, c.1228.]

As one of his first acts on becoming Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the right hon. and learned Gentleman announced the outcome of the Government's review group, or think tank, on the CAP. I welcome some of what the Minister said this afternoon, but his is a deathbed conversion after 17 years of failure to tackle the real faults and weaknesses in the CAP.

The objectives of the CAP are set out in article 39 of the treaty of Rome. That treaty has been in place for 39 years. The intergovernmental conference was an opportunity to set new objectives for the common agricultural policy—objectives that reflected the needs of the industry and the needs of rural areas throughout the European Union as we enter the 21st century. It is probably a matter of regret to many hon. Members on both sides of the House that the Government have made no attempt to seize the opportunity offered by that conference.

The significant item of new expenditure in the common agricultural policy in the forthcoming year will be support for the beef industry, which is needed as a result of the crisis. We recognise the need for that support. Some has already been put in place by the Government, and more will be needed through the common agricultural policy.

The House will clearly remember the Secretary of State for Health reporting to us on 20 March 1996 that the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee had advised the Government that there was a new strain of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, and that BSE was the most likely explanation for the 10 cases of the apparently new strain. The Minister of Agriculture said:

"I do not believe that this information should damage consumer confidence and thus the beef market."—[*Official Report*, 20 March 1996; Vol. 274, c. 387.]

Without doubt, the market for beef and beef products collapsed in the United Kingdom and throughout Europe. On 27 March, the imposition of a worldwide ban on UK beef exports was confirmed by the European Commission. On 1 April, the Minister went to Luxembourg offering the huge 30-month slaughter scheme—the slaughter of cull cows and of cattle over 30 months. He came away with an obligation to devise an additional slaughter scheme, but without even securing a timetable for the lifting of the European Union ban.

On 29 April, the Minister presented a proposal for an additional slaughter programme to the Council of Agriculture Ministers. He came away from the Council with an obligation to strengthen his slaughter proposals—again without even a timetable for the lifting of the European Union ban.

Last week, the European Commission agreed that it would recommend to the European Union veterinary standing committee that the ban on tallow, gelatine and semen be lifted. Labour shares the Government's commitment to the complete lifting of the ban on British beef and beef products, and I am sure that the Minister will acknowledge that any lifting of the ban on those three products will affect relatively few businesses and jobs compared with what is at stake in the context of the overall ban on beef and beef products.

The Minister has had to operate against a background of incredible behaviour on the part of his Cabinet colleagues. It has been widely reported that the Foreign Secretary has written to the Prime Minister demanding stronger leadership in relation to the BSE crisis, and that, in the context of the crisis, the Prime Minister has used language that I cannot repeat in the House of Commons about his European Union counterparts.

Then, of course, we had the threat of a trade war—a threat that lasted 24 hours before the Deputy Prime Minister was scuttling between the television studios to explain to people that the trade war threat was off, and that the issue would have to be resolved by negotiation; he repeated that statement on Monday in the House of Commons.

As the *Farmers Weekly* editorial said,

"government ministers have yet again made"

Britain a

"laughing stock".

If Ministers really believe that such behaviour is helping us to secure a lifting of the ban, they have taken collective leave of their senses.

It is obvious that failure to execute policies in this country properly will have done nothing to restore our standing in the European Union; that standing will not be

[Dr. Strang]

restored until the Government get a real grip on BSE. We must restore the confidence of our consumers—progress has been made in that regard—and we must restore the wider confidence of the world in British beef.

Sir Jim Spicer (West Dorset): The hon. Gentleman just said, "until the Government get a good grip on BSE." What would he do that is not already being done at the initiation of SEAC and all the scientific advice that we are given? Would he go in for mass slaughter, like the French?

Dr. Strang: No. We set out our eight points, which we believe should be implemented; I shall paraphrase them later. We set out clearly in the late 1980s and early 1990s—it is all on the record in *Hansard*—the actions that should have been taken. It is unquestionable that, if we had implemented the policies and proposals recommended by the official Opposition since BSE was identified in 1986, we should not have been in the position that we are in now. That cannot be denied.

At home, the 30-month rule, in the eyes of most people, remains in chaos. I do not think that many Conservative Members who met farmers earlier today recognised the description of the slaughter scheme that the Minister gave us earlier. The scheme was drawn up by the Government at the end of March and was taken to the Council of Agriculture Ministers meeting in Luxembourg on 1 April. According to the Ministry press release of 16 April, the programme was due to come into operation on 29 April. Here we are, on 15 May, more than six weeks after the scheme first came to light, and it is still not properly in place.

When the Government were drawing up the scheme, they must have been aware of the capacity of our rendering plants. They must have been aware that that would be a constraint on the throughput.

I say to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Walden)—I am not sure whether he is still in his place—that it is no use the Government trying to wash their hands of this. It is no use blaming the industry—whether the farmers, the abattoirs or the markets—or officials, or the intervention board. This is a huge operation. Ministers took the decision to implement a huge slaughter scheme, and they have responsibility for ensuring that it is executed properly.

The only possible interpretation of the minutes of the last Council meeting is that the Government are obliged to strengthen their proposal for an additional selective slaughter scheme to help eradicate BSE.

One of Minister's problems has been convincing our European counterparts that we have the facilities to trace the animals most at risk of BSE. I come to the point that the hon. Member for East Antrim (Mr. Beggs) made. Northern Ireland has a superb animal identification system. The Minister's task would have been made much easier if the Government had acted on Labour's proposal six years ago and established a similar identification system in the rest of the UK.

Traceability will be the key to getting us out of this crisis. Most hon. Members have probably received representations stating that technology is available to set up a national cattle database. I should be grateful if the Government would give us the response to the proposals being made by National Milk Records, or any other body, for the establishment of such a system.

Rev. Ian Paisley: I am sure the hon. Gentleman heard the question I asked the Minister. Does he agree that, as cold storage is now available in Northern Ireland, it should be used to allow Northern Ireland to get on with dealing with this matter?

Dr. Strang: Yes, we support that. Indeed, I think the Minister acknowledged that the Government were going down that road. There is obviously some disappointment that he spoke about six weeks. From what the Minister said on previous occasions, we were led to believe that it might be possible to bring that additional cold storage into operation sooner. No one disputes the fact that the priority must be to slaughter those animals as soon as possible. That obviously involves, ultimately, rendering all animals and incinerating all remains of the specified bovine material and the other parts of the carcases. I assume that the Government are committed to that.

Confidence in British beef will be restored only when all measures necessary to keep the BSE agent out of our food are implemented and properly enforced. Labour has set out proposals to restore confidence in the safety of beef, to keep the BSE agent out of our food, to improve the epidemiology of BSE, to increase consumer awareness and to improve the role of Government.

As the Minister will be aware, one of our proposals concerned the encouragement of quality assurance schemes—an issue of interest to Northern Ireland, Scotland and other parts of the United Kingdom. We want quality assurance schemes to be supported, because we want consumers to know where their beef comes from and how it was produced. The Prime Minister, in his ignorance, condemned the proposals, but I am pleased that the Minister said on 3 April that the Government would go down that road for cattle over the age of 30 months. I must put it to him, however, that, six weeks later, farmers of high-quality and late-maturing animals are becoming increasingly frustrated by the lack of progress.

As the Minister knows, we also believe that there should be a full investigation of the fact that 67 per cent. of BSE cases now occur in cattle born after the ban on ruminant-derived protein in ruminant feed: 67 per cent. of cases in the first quarter of the year were among such cattle. The right hon. and learned Gentleman told the House last week that there had been a continuous flow of contaminated feedstuffs to cattle after the feed was banned, and he said that that was why the rules had been tightened as recently as April this year; but he has said that he does not agree that we should look into the cases of cattle born after the ban. It is short-sighted of the Government to refuse to investigate those cases.

Mr. Douglas Hogg: It may help the hon. Gentleman to have the figures. On 7 May, BSE had been confirmed in 26,798 animals born after the introduction of the feed ban in July 1988. Of those animals, 82 per cent. were born in the second half of 1988 and in 1989. A total of 3,481 infected animals were born in 1990, 1,220 in 1991, 100 in 1992 and one in 1993.

Dr. Strang: I take the Minister's point, but the peak incidence of BSE is in cattle four to five years old. I dare

say that cattle often become infected when they are under six months old, but in most cases the symptoms are not detectable until they are four or five years old. As the Oxford study published last week confirms, two thirds of current cases are of animals born after the feed ban was introduced, and that will continue.

An investigation of the younger BSE cases—cattle born after the ban—may well reveal that a number of animal feed mills were failing to keep the BSE agent out of our animal feed after the feed bans were in place. The Government are already committed to an additional selective slaughter programme; identifying those feed mills and their customers may well enable us to have a more closely targeted selected slaughter policy. Improving our ability to identify the cattle at greatest risk of BSE will enable us to have a bigger impact on reducing the number of confirmed BSE cases in the future. That would certainly do the United Kingdom no harm when it comes to convincing our European counterparts that BSE is under control, and that the ban on our beef should be lifted.

There are already some important lessons to be learnt from the BSE crisis. The first is that deregulation, under-regulation and delay are entirely inappropriate in matters of public health. BSE was officially identified in 1986; the House is aware of the Government's subsequent record—a record of delay and under-enforcement. There was a 20-month delay after BSE was identified before farmers had to destroy all suspect cases; a delay of two and a half years before the Government said, in June 1989, that they planned to keep the most infective offal out of human food; and a further seven-month delay before the ban was fully implemented throughout the United Kingdom. Farmers were not fully compensated for slaughtering BSE cattle until February 1990. The Government have admitted that under-compensation for the previous 18 months deterred farmers from declaring suspect cases.

Some hon. Members who follow these matters may remember that, in last year's agriculture debate, I warned the House of the implications of the cuts that had been made in the number of public servants responsible for keeping our food safe. The second lesson that must be learnt from the current crisis is that regulation to protect public health must be effectively enforced. The Government will recall that they have a very poor record in regard to enforcing BSE controls. In September 1995, 48 per cent. of slaughterhouses visited were found to be in breach of controls designed to keep infective offal out of human food. This March, 4 per cent. of slaughterhouses and 17 per cent. of rendering plants visited were still in breach of those controls. Eight feed mills were recently found to be in breach of the ruminant protein ban to keep BSE out of animal feed.

Mr. Hogg: Let me make two points. First, it is true that there was a failure in respect of feed mills, but that preceded 29 March, when the new regulations were introduced. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman did not wish to suggest otherwise. Secondly, I think that the hon. Gentleman will accept that, since the beginning of this year, nearly all the failures, however regrettable they may be, have been very minor.

Dr. Strang: I am grateful to the Minister for raising the first point. It enables me to make it clear that at no point have I suggested that contaminated feed is now reaching our cattle, following the bans introduced at the end of March and the beginning of April. I take it that those bans are achieving their aim. As the Minister will appreciate, I am referring to contaminated feed that reached our cattle after the imposition of the bans six years ago.

I take the Minister's point about enforcement; I accept his assurance that there have been improvements. I know that he has called people in, and has been clamping down. Much of what I am saying, however, relates to decisions and failures on the part of his predecessors. There is no doubt that they were responsible for those decisions and failures. BSE was identified in 1986; if significant damage has been done to the health of the human population—and let us hope that no damage has been done—it was done in the 1980s and into the 1990s, depending on the extent to which the controls were enforced.

Let me return to an issue of which I made great play in last year's debate, with the Minister's predecessor. I refer to the attack—that is the word for it—that successive Governments have mounted on the state veterinary service. The number of people employed by the service has fallen by about a third since the present Government came to power. It has been rationalised and re-rationalised, and some of its work has been privatised. I believe that there were 25 veterinary investigation centres in 1979—I am not referring to the central laboratories—and that we are now down to 13.

The veterinary service is crucial. BSE is currently the major livestock disease, but there have been livestock diseases in the past and, with the single European market and the movement of cattle and other livestock into the United Kingdom from eastern Europe in particular, it is vital that we rescue—I use that word deliberately—our state veterinary service. It is hard to believe that, when we left office, our veterinary service was probably among the best in the world. Now, it is a shadow of its former self, and I appeal to the Government to act.

The third lesson to be learnt is the importance of research. We need a strong research base, capable of long-term work to deal with problems such as BSE. The current BSE-CJD crisis throws new light on the importance of our publicly funded research establishments. The short-term contracts encouraged by the Government cannot be beneficial to the crucial work being done on BSE and CJD, or, indeed, to any other research. Furthermore, the prior options review—the programme for selling our research establishments—must now be abandoned. Surely the Minister would not want to put the units that are responsible for investigating BSE and CJD through the uncertainty and upheaval that the review entails.

There is no escaping the fact that BSE and CJD will be with us for a number of years. Long-term research needs to be done by scientists who are not constantly looking over their shoulder for the next job.

One of the most important scientific tasks is the establishment of a live test for BSE. The Minister will be aware of widespread reports that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has hindered the development of a live test. If it transpires that it has, that will represent an unforgivable breach of its duty to protect animal and human health.

Mr. William Ross: Would the hon. Gentleman support further research to try to determine whether the primary

[Mr. William Ross]

cause of the present epidemic of BSE was sheep scrapie or bovine scrapie, as there still seems to be some argument about which one it was? If the answer is bovine scrapie, our concerns about the transmission of the disease across species will be greatly reduced.

Dr. Strang: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point. It is still an open question. I have heard Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food vets defending the argument that the epidemic was definitely caused by scrapie. I see the Minister nodding his head—perhaps he agrees that we cannot be certain that the starting point was scrapie in sheep. A strain of BSE in cattle may well have multiplied for reasons that have been discussed—notably, the inadequacy of the rendering process. Whatever the cause, there is some concern that the agent can jump species—there is a belief that the disease may have spread to the cat population through pet food. We cannot rule out the possibility of the agent jumping species.

It is important to recognise that, when the scientists advised on the most likely explanation for the 10 new cases of CJD in young adults—the disease normally occurs in older people—it was purely on the basis that there was a BSE epidemic and a large number of people were likely to have eaten infected beef or beef products before the offal ban was put in place in 1989. There has been no evidence as yet to show that CJD in humans has been caused by eating contaminated beef and beef products. We still do not know whether the BSE agent has jumped species and is the cause of CJD in the human population.

Mr. Ian Bruce: To keep the debate on an all-party basis, will the hon. Gentleman confirm that he still stands by the Labour party's policies set out in 1975 and 1979—particularly those on farming and the nation? The hon. Gentleman and the Labour party were then encouraging the intensification of our beef and dairy industry. Members of the Labour party seem to be making many remarks suggesting that intensification and the use of concentrated foods were mistakes. I should be grateful if the hon. Gentleman would tell the House whether the intensification of feed was the right policy.

Dr. Strang: I am not quite sure that I follow the hon. Gentleman, but I shall try to help. There is no doubt that, if we want to produce reasonable quantities of milk and achieve reasonable productivity from dairy herds, there is a role for concentrated feed, but I suspect that there is general support throughout the wider community—reflected in the House—that, as far as is practically possible, we should use more extensive agricultural methods. Indeed, we should encourage organic farming, as the Government are doing.

Only a couple of weeks ago, I was privileged to open a new demonstration farm that linked the environment and farming and encouraged integrated crop management and less use of fertilisers and pesticides. There is a consensus that, while we need aids to production, it is desirable to minimise their use. There are many lessons to be learnt about recycling protein and the use of meat and bone meal. We are clearly learning the hard way.

There are important European aspects of the beef crisis. We are not uncritical of our European counterparts, and we want the ban lifted, but the Government have failed to represent us effectively in Europe. We shall vote against the Government tomorrow because they have failed to represent our interests in Europe, they failed to act responsibly and with due diligence after BSE was identified in 1986 and they signally failed to get to grips with the crisis that followed the Ministers' announcements on 20 March of a possible link between BSE and CJD.

The Government have failed on three counts, which is why we shall vote against them tomorrow evening. I appeal to all hon. Members who agree with our criticism of the Government to join us in the Lobby.

5.45 pm

Sir Jim Spicer (West Dorset): It is natural, and I suppose unavoidable, that our debate today and tomorrow will centre largely on BSE and the iniquitous ban imposed by our so-called European partners. Most of my remarks will relate to beef and the action that we should take to restore prosperity to the beef industry and its allied trades.

It might be of interest to hon. Members if I broaden the debate and say a word about dairy quotas. The beef ban and problems relating to beef are here today and will hopefully be gone at some point in the future, but the milk quotas have been in place for a long time. The hon. Member for Edinburgh, East (Dr. Strang) said that he had been in the House for 26 years; I have been here for only 23 years, but I have a clear recollection of the run-up to the imposition of quotas and I know what happened between 1974 and 1979. The worst period was just after the ill-fated and unhappy—indeed unholy—alliance between the Liberal party and the Labour party, when the Liberal party agreed to maintain Labour in power. It was in 1978 that the damage was done to our dairy industry and the knock-on effect carried through to the quotas.

The Labour Government were in power in 1978. They were not facing an election, and they said that they had a long-term programme to support agriculture. In 1978, milk production increased in the United Kingdom by 4.7 per cent., in the Netherlands by 7.2 per cent., in Ireland by 12.4 per cent. and in Italy by a staggering 18.3 per cent. The key point is that in 1978 and 1979 it was clear to anyone who knew anything about agriculture and what was to happen in the future that there would have to be some form of control over milk production.

Mr. George Stevenson (Stoke-on-Trent, South): While the hon. Gentleman is seeking to apportion blame for the milk quota, will he recall that in the autumn of 1983 the then Government were encouraging, through grants and money, the extension of milk production? Then, in April 1984, the Government presented the same people with a 9 per cent. across-the-board cut.

Sir Jim Spicer: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman because he has raised the very point that I was about to make. In 1978 and 1979, the Government were actively discouraging increased milk production. In 1979, the first Conservative Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food—now Lord Walker—was appointed; he immediately realised that we had to push up milk production in this country so that we would be ready when milk quotas were, inevitably, imposed. Of course, he gave every encouragement to us. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Mrs. Golding) may laugh. She was not in the House at that time and I do not think that she understands anything about milk production.

Mr. Robert Hughes: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Jim Spicer: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will allow me to pursue my line of thought and then I will give way.

By 1983, as a result of all the investment and encouragement in farming, our milk production was increasing dramatically—*[Interruption.]* I do not know which side of the European debate the hon. Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Hughes) was on at that time, but it was the European Commission which imposed the quota. We finished up with a much lower percentage of milk than France, Germany, the Netherlands or almost any other country. The blame for that small quota rests squarely on those who, between 1974 and 1979, did not increase milk production in the way that it could and should have been increased. We are debating the common agricultural policy and this is the time to try for a fairer quota. I hope that the Government will do that.

My next topic relates directly to the BSE crisis. Cull cows are being kept on the farm, and that will continue for another three or four months. Those cows are not dry, which means that our production may be slightly above quota. In any logical organisation—I presume that the European Union is logical—someone would allow an extension of our quota by about 5 per cent. to help our dairy farmers over a difficult period.

The Minister was right to say that until 20 March our farmers had had three marvellous years. I have never known a time when my farmers were not whingeing about almost anything. If it was not the weather it was something else and always there were problems. We must face the reality of exactly what happened on 20 March. First, the SEAC report was leaked to the press and was immediately printed in the *Daily Mirror*. The hon. Member for Peckham (Ms Harman) put down a private notice question at 12.15 and the Government had no choice but to make a statement that afternoon. They were pushed into that. That is why there was no consultation in Europe—*[Interruption.]* I wish that the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme would either stop giggling or leave the Chamber. She is not adding to the debate in any way. Perhaps she is enjoying herself. The scare headlines were followed by the French ban and the European ban was next.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones (Cardiff, Central): Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that the shadow Secretary of State for Health was acting improperly in tabling a question about potentially the greatest health scare this century?

Sir Jim Spicer: Certainly not. The SEAC recommendations and those of the chief medical officer were right and proper. As the Minister said, although he is the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, his prime concern has to be the health of the nation. But for that private notice question, direct contact could have been made about the problem. It is not a Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat problem, but one that affects us all. I would have hoped for consultation rather than exploitation of the *Daily Mirror* story.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Perhaps my hon. Friend is being generous to the hon. Member for Peckham (Ms Harman). I hope that Opposition Members will read the issue of *Hansard* in which the hon. Lady said that it was

"the Government's reckless disregard for public health"—[*Official Report*, 25 March 1996; Vol. 276, c. 712.]

that caused the BSE crisis. Such words were one of the reasons for the Commission's ban on British beef.

Sir Jim Spicer: We all remember exactly what happened at that tragic time. Our farming community is suffering the consequences of all that happened over those two or three days.

The ban must be lifted, and every effort must be made to persuade the European Union that its continued imposition is damaging not only the British beef industry and British agriculture, but agriculture across the board. I know that such efforts are being made.

Mr. Robert Hughes: I am genuinely seeking information. When did the Secretary of State for Health or the Minister of Agriculture receive the SEAC report? Did it suddenly arrive on the *Daily Mirror* news desk before Ministers had seen it? It seemed from ministerial statements that Ministers had digested it thoroughly. If they had had it for even a few days before it leaked to the press and had made no effort to consult the Commission and had not understood its importance, the charge of incompetence can be levelled at them and not at my hon. Friends.

Sir Jim Spicer: Sadly, I am not a member of the Cabinet, but I understand that the report was discussed in Cabinet that week and it was decided that something would have to be said that week. But these matters were condensed and the irresponsible leak to the media for a good headline in the *Daily Mirror* played its part.

Mr. Robert Hughes *rose—*

Sir Jim Spicer: I am sorry. I will not give way because many hon. Members wish to speak.

We must persuade the Community to lift the ban, which is damaging agriculture throughout the Community. Many people seem to think that the lifting of the ban will automatically lead to a resumption of beef exports, but it will not. Another way will be found to block exports or some politicians will continue to frighten their populations. The chances of our getting a sizeable amount of beef back into the European Community is negligible, and that is sad because we worked hard to build up that market.

Before the ban came into effect, about 30 per cent. of the beef consumed in Britain came from the European Community. Action to shift the balance towards our own beef industry could be concentrated in that one area. We could cut that 30 per cent. to 10 per cent., which would almost balance the loss of our exports to Europe. There would be equilibrium. The cull cows that would leave the food chain account for a further 15 to 20 per cent. Even allowing for a fall in beef consumption, we would be in a much stronger position to rebuild our home base. In my view, we should concentrate on that.

How would we do it? There are two ways. Many people have called on the Government to take dramatic action and to ban the import of beef from Europe. I ask the Minister whether it is possible for us to do that on health grounds. My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture has said that the way in which we treat our beef makes it

[Sir Jim Spicer]

much safer than beef that comes into the country from Holland, France or Belgium, where we know that they have BSE. Should we not say that we will introduce a ban until such time as those countries introduce the safety measures that we have introduced in relation to removing the brain and the spinal cord?

Mr. John Sykes (Scarborough): Did my hon. Friend read an article in the *Daily Express*—it was sent to me by one of my farmers from Whitby—stating that poisonous chemicals or growth hormones are still being injected into Spanish cattle, French cattle and Italian cattle against the law and that that beef is being eaten by people in the European Community? Is that not just as bad as the alleged atrocities relating to BSE? On that ground alone, should we not ban foreign beef coming into this country?

Sir Jim Spicer: I could not agree more. I believe that the time has come for us to retaliate—*[Interruption.]* Inevitably, we hear an outcry from the Liberal Members.

Mr. Tyler: If the hon. Gentleman has been listening to the Minister, to the President of the National Farmers Union, to the Prime Minister and to the Deputy Prime Minister, he will know that that is ridiculous talk. He is delaying the day that we will get rid of the ban. The words that he is using today may discourage President Chirac—should he dare to read anything that the hon. Gentleman says—from releasing us from this ridiculous ban.

I ask the hon. Gentleman to consider one other thing. He rightly emphasised the need for consultation. Can he explain why, in the two days before the announcement in the House of Commons to which he has referred, the Minister of State was in Brussels—in the Council of Agricultural Ministers—but did nothing to consult our colleagues in Europe?

Sir Jim Spicer: The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) scares me—I frighten very easily. I will say what I want to say in the debate and I will deal with the British people because I know how they feel and I know that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues are out of touch. They do not want to take any action. There is nothing to stop the Government demanding from other countries the same standard of beef as we have in this country. Why should those countries not deal with the offal in the same way?

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Sir Jim Spicer: No, I will not give way again—I shall finish my speech because many other hon. Members wish to speak.

Rev. Ian Paisley: Surely the hon. Gentleman will give way to me.

Sir Jim Spicer: Yes, I will.

Rev. Ian Paisley: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman has read with great interest that there has been an outbreak of this disease in a herd in the Irish Republic. Is he aware that that herd was slaughtered and put into the food chain? Does that not back up what he is saying—that we should be careful about bringing in meat from the European Union because they are not keeping up the proper standards themselves?

Sir Jim Spicer: I am delighted that the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) is present today and not in the European Parliament. That is another way in which we can approach this and something that the Government might consider doing. It is up to the general public to play their part. They have the power of their purse to demand the sale of British beef. They have the right to say to shops and restaurants, "If you will not sell British beef, we will go and buy it somewhere else". If some shops and restaurants do not sell British beef, plenty of other places will. In that context, I am delighted to have seen a press release stating that Asda is to ban all foreign beef. That is a step in the right direction.

The Members of Parliament from Dorset and all the candidates from Dorset wrote the following open letter:

"The recent beef episode has not been good for this country. However, it has graphically shown just how many people in Dorset are involved in the farming industry. It has further demonstrated just how critical farming remains in the fabric of our country's life and, most particularly, of our rural life.

Now that all the facts are known and it is confirmed that beef is safe for us all to eat, and certainly much safer than imported beef, it is perfectly right and proper for the general public to show their support for our farmers by insisting that British beef, and only British beef, will be available for sale. If any shop or restaurant cannot give such an assurance, then our advice is to go elsewhere and buy British."

I hope that that campaign will be taken up by all hon. Members and that they will all write similar letters to their constituents—it would not even cut across Liberal sensibilities.

I know that some hon. Members are a bit squeamish about picketing—I am not talking about violence, but about handing out leaflets and signing complaint forms—but that is a good way to do it. Only yesterday, one of my hon. Friends said that he had signed seven complaint forms in a McDonald's in one day. I am going to try to beat that record and sign 25. We can all go in and we can all sign for British beef.

This process works. It has worked with Wimpy, which has responded to public demand. We have been asked to lay off McDonald's because it may come round, but I do not think that it will. I do not think that Burger King will come round either, unless and until we put pressure on it. I will not eat a McDonald's burger until the company lifts its ban on British beef—and I certainly will not go into a Burger King even after that. McDonald's had better watch out, because I used to eat there quite a lot. The hon. Member for North Cornwall shakes his head; Liberal Members are always squeamish and they want the soft option, but there is no soft option on this.

Mr. Tyler: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Jim Spicer: No, I will finish my speech. It will be a long haul for us to get back to where we were before 20 March, but it can be done if we all play our part. Let us announce that British beef is the safest in the world and let us eat only British beef and beef products, at least for the next few years. I am delighted to see the

Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on the Front Bench. She has done a lot over the past few weeks.

Dorset farmers have raised the following four points with me. First, we have to think about the problem of casualties. They are mounting on farms and something has to be done. That issue is uppermost in the minds of many of the people in the Gallery. My farmers care about their casualties and they want something done, and quickly.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Morris): Order. The hon. Gentleman has been in the House for many years and he knows that the Gallery does not exist.

Sir Jim Spicer: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. If people from Dorset are present in the House today, they will be extremely concerned about the situation in relation to casualties. Secondly, why is intervention not working? Why is not more beef going into intervention? My farmers cannot understand it—it is an escape route and more farmers could and should be using it.

The third issue is more staff. If we have an emergency—if we are spending an extra £1 billion over the next year or so—we should get decent staff. We need people who can answer a telephone intelligently and not pass farmers from one person to another. Finally, I refer to improved communications. Sending out circulars is one thing, but an occasional letter should be addressed to each farmer and signed by the Minister. That would be marvellous, and I believe that it done with computers as they are today. As we move forward and pick up on the number of cattle being slaughtered, that is something that we should do. And why not challenge the quality of imports?

I conclude on a happy note for Dorset. A slaughterhouse in my constituency—Normans—was removed from the list of abattoirs for some reason and therefore did not make the short list of 21. However, the Minister of State told me this afternoon that it will be reinstated in the list as from Monday week. That is a great boon to all the farmers in Dorset and, above all, to a marvellous slaughterhouse which has operated successfully for many years.

6.9 pm

Mr. George Foulkes (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley): I am grateful to be called to speak in the debate not least because, if you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, had called the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), to speak immediately after the hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir J. Spicer), the simmering feud between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats in the west country could have erupted into a major conflagration. There has been one fire in the Palace of Westminster today and we do not want another.

Mr. Tyler: I must explain to the hon. Gentleman that I had beef for lunch, so I am feeling rather red-blooded and I reacted to the outrageous suggestions by the hon. Member for West Dorset.

Mr. Foulkes: I think that the hon. Gentleman's reactions predate lunchtime today. I am also grateful to be called in the debate as I am proud to represent a large rural constituency with extensive farming interests. The Ayrshire beef and dairy herds have the best reputation in the country.

My colleagues who represent Ayrshire constituencies and I met a delegation of Ayrshire farmers who were part of the deputation that lobbied Members of Parliament today. We had a useful discussion and we learnt how strongly those farmers feel about the present situation. My colleagues who represent rural areas—the numbers are increasing on this side of the House and there will be many more after the next election—and I have emphasised to our colleagues who represent city constituencies that not only farmers but thousands of workers down the line are affected by the crisis.

Mr. Marlow: The hon. Gentleman said that many of his constituents are concerned about the present situation. How will they react to the news that the veterinary committee meeting in Brussels has risen without resolving the issue of gelatine?

Mr. Foulkes: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point. My constituents will be deeply disappointed by that news, but I do not think that they will be surprised.

Thousands of workers in the slaughtering, rendering, meat-processing and haulage industries will be affected. Those in the equipment manufacturing and supplies industries will suffer also as farmers who are uncertain about their future cut back on their purchases. Some workers in those industries were laid off initially without wages or benefits. They will be sadly disappointed by the way in which the Minister of Agriculture dismissed them today with a wave of his hand. It was as though they did not matter—but they are suffering also.

The farmers and my other constituents contend that the Government's attitude has been characterised by dithering, complacency, confusion and by chaos. Although the Government's announcement might have been precipitated by a question from this side of the House—the hon. Member for West Dorset said that the Government intended to make an announcement anyway—they had been aware of the problem for some time. They made no preparations prior to the announcement: they did not assess the likely reactions or consequences and had no plan for dealing with them.

There is general concern also about the Government's blundering ineptitude in the negotiations. The Minister of Agriculture does not have the best reputation for tact and diplomacy—we have seen him at work in other contexts—and I think that that exacerbated our difficulties within the European Union. The Government have now introduced a selective cull and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) said, we welcome the principle behind it. However, the cull was introduced before the appropriate measures were in place. Hon. Members on both sides of the House have levelled criticisms, questions and challenges at the Government regarding continuing problems with red tape and bureaucracy.

Rev. Ian Paisley: Is it not amazing that the slaughter should go ahead without any undertaking from Europe that the ban will be lifted when the cull is completed?

Mr. Foulkes: That is a very good point. I believe that we could have been granted that concession if our negotiators had applied a little more intelligence and capability. I shall return to that point later.

[Mr. Foulkes]

The legacy of delay and dithering dates back some time. Bovine spongiform encephalopathy was identified in November 1986, Ministers were informed of it in June 1987, and in 1989 the Agriculture Committee found that the Government had reacted too slowly regarding the specified offal ban. There are many other examples of the Government's dithering, lack of urgency and complacency in dealing with the problem.

However, we must not dwell on the many mistakes of the past, but we must try to sort out the problem and help those who are suffering. The trade ban is affecting Scottish farming particularly badly, as my hon. Friends know—I consider the hon. Member for Angus, East (Mr. Welsh) to be an hon. Friend in this context at least.

Beef exports are worth £500 million to the United Kingdom, of which £120 million comes from Scotland. Much of Scottish farm production focuses on the export market and three out of four Scottish farmers are involved in beef production. Some 50,000 cattle on Scottish farms are awaiting slaughter and it will take more than a year to get rid of the backlog. We face a particularly difficult problem in Scotland and in Northern Ireland.

Slaughterhouses have also suffered badly. Many operations have ground to a halt, with workers often receiving no wages or benefits. Slaughterhouses which deal with 800,000 cattle a year and upon which many thousands of workers depend are now operating part time. For instance, in Sanquhar they are working a two or three-day week—if they are lucky.

The Ayrshire delegation emphasised the fact that the crises has caused a slump in the market for clean cattle. Cattle that were fetching 150p per kilogram before the crisis now sell for only 80p per kilogram. The tragedy and the irony is that that is less than the 85p per kilogram that is realised by cull cattle. The market has collapsed completely and that is creating tremendous problems for farmers.

The meat processing and bakery industry—which is particularly important in Ayrshire—processes 12,000 tons of beef annually and it has been hit badly by the crisis in confidence. Sales fell dramatically at the start of the crisis and sales in Scotland are now only 50 per cent. of their pre-crisis levels. Road hauliers have been similarly affected. Four out of five vehicles involved in meat transportation are off the road and 80 per cent. of lorries that transport meat are no longer working. Many companies are close to bankruptcy. A road haulage section which employs 1,500 people is losing nearly £5 million per month. The crisis cannot continue.

I have received dozens and dozens—maybe scores—of letters since the crisis began. I have had hundreds of telephone calls and meetings with farmers. Mr. Buchanan from Lendalfoot has written to me, saying:

"Our investment programme has been immediately halted, no further expenditure can be made at this time. All livestock farming enterprises are in the same position. The wheel has stopped turning!"

We must start the wheel turning again. The crisis is having a physical and a psychological effect upon the health of those affected. Another of my constituents—I will not mention his name—wrote to me, saying:

"I had to go to the doctor because I was suffering from depression, I am now on medication".

Farmers and others are also in a difficult situation financially.

Our top priority must be the lifting of the ban. That will be achieved by reasoned argument, clever diplomacy and the proper deployment of scientific information, not by bluster, blackmail, the threat of retaliation or by a trade ban. That would only make the situation worse, as the hon. Member for North Cornwall has said.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: My hon. Friend is making a good point on retaliation. How would it benefit farmers, especially mixed farmers, in his or anyone else's constituency to engage in threatened retaliation that affects the beef and other markets? I know from family experience that many farmers in my part of the country are farming lamb and expect to sell much of it to France. How would it help our farmers if there were a trade war with Europe on other farming produce?

Mr. Foulkes: My hon. Friend is right. Once such a trade war starts, it is a difficult to stop. It escalates and can affect many more innocent people. I am not a Euro-sceptic, but I can understand why they may be getting frustrated. To use this issue, however, to advance their Euro-scepticism is dangerous, short sighted, selfish and irresponsible.

Mr. Andrew Welsh (Angus, East): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the priority is to breach the blanket European ban, whether on gelatine or tallow? I notice that the veterinary committee has adjourned until Monday: it wants more detail. The breach, however, must take place, whether on those items or on specialist herds from Northern Ireland or Scotland. We must breach that blanket ban as part of a step-by-step approach to getting the whole industry on the move. It does not matter where it comes. We must get that first breach.

Mr. Foulkes: I agree with the hon. Gentleman and I think that he agrees that it should be done by argument, by scientific information, by diplomacy and by political pressure, but not by threats.

Every week we read in the press that the Minister hopes that the ban will be lifted and then it never is. That also creates problems. The false expectations that the Minister raises are unhelpful; almost as unhelpful as when he said, in the first weekend of the crisis, that 4 million cattle would have to be slaughtered. He is part of the problem, not part of the solution. More hon. Members should realise that. They may not do so soon, but they will.

Intervention must be brought into play as soon as possible. On 29 March, I wrote to the Secretary of State for Scotland proposing that on behalf of my constituents, who had made the suggestion but, six or seven weeks later, there is still no effective action. It is typical of Ministers' attitude. They pooh-pooh suggestions, saying, "We don't need to do that" and move only under intense pressure from Members of Parliament, the industry, the media and others.

As I said in an intervention, the Prime Minister promised that had he would cut red tape to speed up the process, but nothing has happened. Because of technicalities, farmers have huge problems getting cattle into disposal. They travel hundreds of miles and find that they cannot get cattle even into intervention because of a small technicality. That red tape must be familiar to hon. Members representing rural areas. Farmers in my constituency complain to me about not just that, but many other matters. The red tape is no better—in fact, it is worse—in this instance.

Even worse is that only 50,000 tonnes have been allowed for intervention for the whole European Union. It is wrong and a scandal—I say this not to attack the Germans, but to advance my argument—that 25,000 of those tonnes should go to Germany and only 1,200 to 1,500 should go to the United Kingdom. The scheme was designed to discourage intervention and to reduce the beef mountain—that was part of the strategy. That is not appropriate for the current bovine spongiform encephalopathy crisis.

Mr. Garnier: Did I hear the hon. Gentleman correctly? Did he say 1,200 to 1,500 tonnes to Britain or did he mean 12,000 to 15,000 tonnes?

Mr. Foulkes: No. I am glad that the hon. and learned Gentleman has said that because, when I met a delegation of farmers, they said that the figure was 1,200 to 1,500. I said, "Surely you mean 12,000 to 15,000" and they said no. That was astonishing. That was a helpful intervention. The hon. Gentleman usually is most helpful.

Mr. Garnier: Yes, I am. Is it not the case that 1,500 tonnes were taken in the last bidding round?

Mr. Foulkes: No. I ask my hon. Friends perhaps to confirm that, but that is certainly my understanding of the position.

I do not want to go on too long. I have already made the case on behalf of my constituents, who are suffering. Now is the time for swift action to deal with the crisis, which demands not the Government's sluggardly attitude, but the most positive action. Today, the delegation from the National Farmers Union for Scotland said that the Prime Minister must take action. I hope that, when he talks to President Chirac today, he will, on every occasion, try to persuade and to use arguments to achieve some movement on the ban.

Although short-term measures are important—and I have been arguing for immediate measures—we need a long-term strategy. While we are dealing with this crisis, we must not forget that strategy. It is about time, to use one of the Minister of Agriculture's phrases earlier, that Ministers started to work with the grain. The prickly, tetchy approach that the Minister takes from time to time does not give confidence. It is only if we have that confidence and if there is confidence in the Minister that the industry will recover. To be honest, that confidence will come first only with a change of Minister, but finally only with a change of Government.

6.25 pm

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): We are discussing a matter that is of grave concern to the farming community throughout this United Kingdom, but it is of greater concern to the parts of the United Kingdom that depend on agriculture and on the employment that flows from agriculture. The Northern Ireland economy is agriculturally based. Agriculture is the largest employer. Agriculture-fed ancillary industries are by far the largest industries in Northern Ireland. Therefore, if our agriculture economy is flawed, fractured and broken, Northern Ireland's whole economy will break down completely.

It is amazing that parts of this United Kingdom are a step ahead of all Europe in relation to preventing bovine spongiform encephalopathy and its spread. I met the European Union Agriculture Commissioner with two colleagues from Northern Ireland and with farming industry representatives. We asked him: "What would Northern Ireland have to do to come up to the standard prevalent throughout the rest of the European Union?" His answer was interesting. He said, "You have nothing to do because parts of Europe are not as far forward as Northern Ireland or parts of Scotland." The European Union Agriculture Commissioner was admitting that parts of the United Kingdom are further ahead in taking good and effective steps against BSE.

What do we do to get the ban lifted? I agree with the intervention by the hon. Member for Angus, East (Mr. Welsh), who said that we must breach the ban in some way. This is the way in which we can breach it. We are not going to achieve a wholesale lifting of the ban.

In regard to the rendering of certain products, today, the European Union has not lifted the ban and it is going back for more information tomorrow. So we should work on those parts of our country that have a good reputation and are further ahead than even parts of the European Union.

Groups from Europe came to look at parts of the United Kingdom. When they returned, they reported that there was no doubt that Northern Ireland, parts of Scotland and parts of England were well ahead in the matter. Why cannot we start with those parts? Why cannot the Government say that we should lift the ban in such parts? That is what happened with swine fever in Germany.

There is a European law about such action, which we put before the Commissioner. One of their own laws states that a line can be drawn around any area of any country where there is animal disease. If that were done, areas where the disease is not prevalent could proceed. Why cannot that be done now in the United Kingdom? That is where the pressure must be exerted. It is blatantly unfair that parts of the United Kingdom, which, as I have said, even the Commissioner admits are ahead of parts of Europe, should be held to ransom until it is possible to lift the entire ban. The House and the Government should be concentrating on that.

We in Northern Ireland are very disappointed that we do not even have the help of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. He makes pleasing speeches and tells the farmers how good they are, but when it comes to something practical to save our economy, he says that it cannot be done and that we must all hang together. I do not want to be anti-English, for I am not anti-English, but I must say that if the whole of England had an advantage over Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, all the Englishmen would be on their feet asking to be allowed to use it, and more power to them. When I was elected to the House 26 years ago, I was told, "You know, Ian, this is an English House of Commons." I have learned that through the years.

There is a way in which to get rid of the ban. As the hon. Member for Angus, East said, we should breach the ban. We would then be able to progress bit by bit. Even if we got back to where we were before, we would have to make up a lot of leeway. If the ban were lifted today, it would not mean that our agriculture would be back on the road, that all the people who have become unemployed would be re-employed or that all the people

[Rev. Ian Paisley]

who have gone out of business would have some chance again. Our agriculture enterprises are in a sorry and sad state today.

I was not satisfied with the Minister's reply to my point that Northern Ireland had cold storage available. It could be opened tomorrow. Why cannot we therefore go ahead, slaughter the beasts and put them into cold storage immediately? Why must we wait for six weeks until all the United Kingdom can take part in the scheme? Every place in the United Kingdom that has cold storage should make it available now. Will the Minister assure me that when I go back to Northern Ireland I will be able to say that the scheme can go ahead?

What about the beasts being fattened on farms? Farmers know that the beasts are worth nothing to them, yet they have to feed and take care of them. The farmers in my constituency have rung an emergency line, but they have been told that their beasts cannot possibly be killed and that it is not known when they can be killed. There will be 40,000 cattle slaughtered in Northern Ireland under the scheme, but that number cannot be handled. Certainly, the renderers in Northern Ireland cannot handle that number because we are short of such facilities. What do we do?

I understand that the Northern Ireland Office has tried to find out whether the beasts could be rendered in some part of Europe. They were to be sent to Denmark for rendering, but that was not possible. We are in an impossible situation. The only way that I can see out of it is to slaughter the beasts, put the carcases into cold storage and deal with them when the renderers are available. Farmers who have lobbied the House today and farmers from other parts of the United Kingdom to whom I have talked say the same: "Open the cold storage and slaughter the beasts."

I want to make a plea about intervention, which has already been raised. Why cannot we have a larger intervention scheme? Why cannot the young bulls that are not allowed to be included in intervention be dealt with? The farmers are asking for all that. With all due respect to my former colleague in the European Parliament, the hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir J. Spicer), farmers do not want to receive a personal letter. They do not want any communication but that which says, "Bring your beast. It will be slaughtered. You will get your payment for it." They do not want any red tape; they want action. They are not asking for what cannot be done. Such action could be taken.

The Minister must get a move on. The crisis did not happen yesterday. It is going on and on and we should ask ourselves how much headway we have made. We have made certain headway, which is welcome. We welcome everything that has helped the farmers, but we have reached a logjam, and in some way it must be broken.

Mr. Cash: Would the hon. Gentleman like to know that it has just been announced that the veterinary standing committee has turned us down? Does he agree that the logjam to which he has just referred is absolutely outrageous and that the Government must take sufficient action, including the suspension of payments? *[Interruption.]* It is all very well for Opposition Members to chunter on, but they are doing absolutely nothing to improve the position.

Rev. Ian Paisley: We have already heard that and I have already commented on it. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman was not present when I did so.

The parts of the United Kingdom that the commissioner admits are ahead of the rest of the European Union must breach the ban. We will not lift a blanket ban. Anybody who thinks that some day we will wake up and the entire ban will be lifted is wrong. It will not happen that way. We should use what brain power God has given us to try to achieve a breach.

I attended a meeting over which Lord Plumb, a colleague of the hon. Member for West Dorset, presided. It was an anti-Scottish, anti-Welsh and anti-Northern Ireland meeting. It was to tell Europe that we are all standing together. Some of my friends from other countries in Europe said that if Lord Plumb carried on like that the ban would never be lifted. But if we identified parts of the United Kingdom that have done everything that they have been asked to do and are even ahead of parts of Europe, and we argued that under the European law we are entitled to breach the ban, we would go forward.

Mr. Welsh: Given the hon. Gentleman's experience in Europe, does he not think that the heart of the problem is that the Government simply do not know how to negotiate in Europe? If they negotiated properly, they would achieve exactly what he is setting out.

Rev. Ian Paisley: The hon. Gentleman knows that I am not a European sceptic—I am anti-Europe and fight my seat on that issue. I believe that when one is in Europe one needs to learn how to milk the cow and get the cream, even if the cow is killed afterwards. All I am saying is that I have learned that Europe does what one asks it to do and then one can do anything.

Does any hon. Member believe that all the member states of the European Union dot the i's and stroke the t's of European law? Not one does, but they say that they do. It is time that the British Government were like Nelson and turned a blind eye to certain things and sailed to victory. That is where we have failed. If we breach the ban, we will move forward.

Arguments about tallow and other things are insignificant when our agricultural industry is going down the road to total ruin.

What do we say to the lorry man who says, "I have built up my business in transporting carcase meat, and now it is all over. I am finished. I started with one lorry; I now have 20 lorries on the road. I gave employment to 20 people—all sacked, with no compensation and no nothing"? Those are the people we should be thinking about, and the only way that we can help them is to get this ban lifted.

I ask the Minister: please, do something about the current logjam. The Government do not need to ask Europe about some matters—they can take action now. Hon. Members have today mentioned people who have been able to sell their meat, but they are selling it at a loss. They have lost. The hon. Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes) mentioned some prices that have been paid, and the people selling have made a loss. Those people must be taken into consideration because they are running their businesses at a loss, and it will catch up with them.

The Government must take in hand all these matters. The House, farmers and the people of the United Kingdom are looking for action, and they must have it. The Government can delay no longer.

6.40 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): The hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) will be surprised to hear that I am delighted to follow him—because I am not an Englishman, I am a Cornishman. I have at least that sense of identity to share. I also share very much his sense of the devastation that has been caused to the rural economy, to the rural community and to a huge number of totally innocent people. People have lost their jobs and livelihoods through absolutely no fault of their own. That is true in every part the United Kingdom.

I agree very much with what the hon. Member for North Antrim said in his concluding remarks, about the need to remove some of the blockages, which is a matter that is entirely in the hands of the Agriculture Minister. Clearing them does not depend on negotiations in Brussels or anywhere else on the continent, but on the Minister and his team. The very positive debate that we had on Monday—some hon. Members who were present for it are in the Chamber today—showed not only a recognition by Back Benchers on both sides of the House but an explicit acknowledgement by the Minister of State that he holds in his hands the power to remove some of the worst problems that now face the industry.

In that debate, one or two hon. Members seemed to be under the illusion that all the problems had been resolved or that they could all be put down to some wicked Eurocrats across the water. I think that it would be appropriate if I were to read for their benefit the brief that has been given to Conservative Members for the south-west in preparation for today's National Farmers Union lobby. They were urged to

"ram home just how chaotic and frustrating the present situation is, and the need for the Government to get it sorted quickly."

As the hon. Member for North Antrim said, it is a question of "action this day", and we have already had 56 days too many since the announcement that precipitated the crisis.

To be fair, the Minister of State acknowledged his responsibility and took great trouble to try to respond to the many concerns expressed on both sides of the House on Monday. I am particularly disappointed that the hon. Members for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), for Newark (Mr. Alexander), for Taunton (Mr. Nicholson) and for St. Ives (Mr. Harris) are not in the Chamber now, because I think that they would repeat the criticisms of the Minister's handling of the cattle disposal scheme, which have been expressed again in this debate.

The hon. Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes) and the hon. Member for North Antrim are entirely right: the industry has been devastated and, with it, great tranches of employment have been wiped out. Many of those businesses will find it extremely difficult to recover.

While it is true, as hon. Members have said, that the export ban is of critical importance, and although I endorse the view that we have to seek step by step to have it removed, it is also true that the activities of our own Minister and our own Government can wipe out so much of that great industry if we are not very careful. If and when the ban is removed, a great deal of the industry will simply no longer exist to take advantage of the export potential that will be reopened to us. That is especially true of Scotland and Northern Ireland, which have—we must admit it—been one step ahead in this matter. I shall come back to that point later in my speech.

I am glad that the Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the hon. Member for Tiverton (Mrs. Browning) is in the Chamber. I hope that she will not, as she did on Monday, adopt a tone of aggressive personal attack, because there is across the Floor of the House a sensibility of the severity with which this problem has hit the rural community. It was not appropriate to spend precious moments on ill-directed and inaccurate personal attack.

There were two points on Monday might which were not addressed, and I therefore make no apology for raising them now. In her reply to Monday's debate, the Minister made no reference to the questions raised on both sides of the House as to whether any sort of contingency plan had been in place in the Ministry. As hon. Members have said in this debate, even if no such plan was in preparation before last November, the scare that happened in that month made it quite clear that, sooner or later, we might face this problem. If that is true, it was a scandal to have no contingency plan in place to deal with rendering capacity, for example.

I hope that the Minister will tell us in her reply whether there was a plan, whether the plan that we now have is it, and, if so, why it is not working. I hope that she will also tell us why the Minister of State initially said that he had the renderers' complete co-operation, bearing it in mind that, as I understand it, some 90 per cent. of the total rendering capacity belongs to the same commercial group of companies. There were not many people to deal with, yet, when it came to the crunch last week, we found that the 70-odd abattoirs that apparently had arrangements with the Ministry, the intervention board and the Meat and Livestock Commission were found not to have the renderers' agreement. The number of abattoirs therefore dropped at the weekend to 21 and, as I told the Agriculture Minister in my intervention, I have today been informed that not even those 21 have clearance from the renderers.

It is totally unsatisfactory that in this type of crisis Her Majesty's Government appear to be beholden to a commercial interest of that nature and to be held over a barrel.

In the debate on Monday, the Minister gave no indication whether the concerns expressed by hon. Members on both sides of the House—by the hon. Members who represent rural areas—about the proposal for a selective slaughter policy, in addition to the 30-month cattle disposal scheme, had been brought to any sort of fruition and whether they had been discussed in full with the industry or with the European Commission.

It is of critical importance to recognise that the 30-month scheme is a non-selective scheme. It is indiscriminate by its very nature, which is one of its problems. We want to have a mature beef assurance scheme so that cattle that mature later can be exempted and maintained for the purposes for which they are intended—they are, of course, particularly good for the prime beef market.

Mr. Ian Bruce: I am always rather confused by Liberal Democrats who say they do not believe in personal attack

[Mr. Ian Bruce]

and then go on straight in and make a personal attack. I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman would like to put straight the record on his speech on Monday, when he accused the Government of choosing the 30-month scheme rather than saying that the Government were responding to a scheme proposed by the food industry and the NFU?

Mr. Tyler: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for asking that question. If he will read my speech, he will find that I explicitly answered that point, which has also been referred to in this debate by the hon. Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley.

In a television interview on the Sunday before the NFU presented its proposals, the Agriculture Minister referred not only to the possibility of a mass slaughter scheme—he mentioned millions, as the hon. Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley said—but to the possibility of a slaughter based on 30 months. Up to that point, there had been no mention of a slaughter policy based on 30 months. The Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee's recommendations were based on the suggestion that deboning should take place for cattle of more than 30 months, which is quite different. That is not a massive slaughter.

Mr. Bruce: What about the NFU?

Mr. Tyler: If the hon. Gentleman will read my speech—*[Interruption.]* No; the hon. Gentleman clearly cannot read. I reported accurately the catalogue of events. On the Sunday, the Agriculture Minister made his statement on television. On the Monday, the Minister met the NFU, as did I and my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown). That proposal was presented after the Minister had already floated the idea. So the Minister first introduced that suggestion into the public domain.

If there is going to be an additional and selective cull, there are three absolutely essential preconditions. First, that cull must be firmly rooted in the scientific advice on which the Government are claiming to act. It must therefore be related to identification of any possibility, or scintilla of possibility, as the Minister of State has said, of exposure to potentially contaminated feed. That must require a means of ensuring traceability and a national registration scheme. As the hon. Member for North Antrim has rightly said, Northern Ireland may be one step ahead, and we will have to introduce such a scheme area by area. It is also true that some parts of Scotland are further advanced in the introduction of such a scheme. Hence the importance of the questions that I have asked in recent weeks about the possibility of animal-to-animal or maternal transmission. If that is even a minor route for infection, we must have a policy to deal with it; otherwise the scientific base collapses.

Whether that cull is to cover the rumoured 40,000 cattle or more, the Government must certainly insist on selection according to proven risk. They should not operate some haphazard or random scheme.

The second precondition is that the cull must be accompanied by a cast-iron guarantee of full European Union compensation. As we know, the present scheme triggers just 30 per cent. in net terms, as a result of rebate arrangements negotiated by the former Prime Minister, now Lady Thatcher. That means that the cull would not result in British farmers receiving 60 per cent. or even 70 per cent. compensation, as has been suggested. If we are to have a selective cull, and if it is to apply across Europe, we cannot be the one country in the Union that receives less compensation for our farmers than that offered to others. They must be given 100 per cent. financial support.

The third essential precondition is that such a cull must lead to immediate agreement in the Council of Agriculture Ministers on a timetable for the removal of the export ban. I accept, as other hon. Members have suggested, that its introduction may take some time, but it must be a precondition of any agreement to an additional cull. As several hon. Members have rightly said, that agreement will take place at Government level in the Council of Ministers. The support for such an agreement is already evident from what the Minister has said and what many others have heard from the Commission.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Could the hon. Gentleman explain to the House and to me in particular how some of those preconditions can be met according to anything like a realistic timetable when, as far as I am aware, the medical and veterinary knowledge is such that risk assessments cannot be made? I agree that those preconditions are desirable, but I cannot see how they are achievable according to anything like a reasonable time scale.

Mr. Tyler: The hon. Gentleman will have to wait for the Minister's reply, because she and the Minister have said on a number of occasions that the veterinary committee basically accepts the thesis on which we have operated. If the scientific judgment is that we are correct, it follows that it will be possible to agree a timetable. I do not suggest that agreement on immediate removal of the export ban is probable, but a timetable towards that end is not an unrealistic expectation.

Sir Michael Spicer (South Worcestershire): I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman has heard the latest news [HON. MEMBERS: "Yes, we have."] Well, it seems that everyone has heard it. Surely that news cast some doubt on the hon. Gentleman's arguments and those advanced by the hon. Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes). They have argued that quiet diplomacy should be adopted and that agreement should be reached according to rational scientific argument. The scientific committee has specifically turned down a request for such an agreement, when there is manifestly no scientific reason for doing so. Surely that goes against their argument.

Mr. Tyler: The hon. Gentleman has obviously not been listening to the debate, but I have, and because of that I have not heard the precise details of the latest news. As I understand it, however, the veterinary standing committee has adjourned its discussions until Monday to await some further information. It has not turned down the application. The Minister can confirm that later.

I hope that we all agree that the existence and our membership of the EU institutions makes possible an orderly progress towards lifting the export ban. Imagine how long it would take in bilateral negotiations to remove a ban when 40-odd countries hold it against us? I hope that the Minister will comment on the decision-making process that would be necessary were that to be the case.

Suppose, for example, that we had to have one-to-one discussions with the 25 countries that banned the import of British beef before 20 March, let alone the 25 countries outside Europe which have adopted that ban since that date. That makes a total of over 60 countries, including those in the European Union. If we were not actively party to the decision-making process of the European Union we would have to enter into bilateral discussions with all those countries, which would be quite impossible.

Such matters are usually dealt with by consensus and, in extremis, by qualified majority voting. If we were dependent on a veto in those discussions in Europe before we could make any process, we would be in even greater difficulty.

The farming community is looking for some clear indication of where we are going. It needs to know the target and where is the light at the end of the tunnel. The farmers from all over Britain who lobbied us today are desperate about the way in which their industry has been devastated by recent events. Of course, it was badly affected by the original announcement, but even more so by the eight weeks of dither and delay as Ministers have sought to get a grip on what has happened. Those farmers need to know about some targets. For example, will it be possible to give a date after which no animal can be expected ever to have been exposed to contaminated feed? Perhaps that would mean an animal born after 1 April this year, or even 1 July this year. Such an announcement would mean that farmers could see an end to their problems.

One west country farmer said to me this afternoon that he felt that "We are plagued with cows that won't sell, grass that won't grow and a Government that won't do its job."

Normally, I would wish to speak at some length about reform of the common agricultural policy, but I know that many hon. Members wish to speak, and those comments will have to wait for another day.

It is clear that most hon. Members accept that it is the Government who must take the lead to remove the burden of devastation that lies across the land at the moment. That cannot wait for decisions to be made elsewhere, nor does it have to wait for such decisions. On Monday night the Minister of State was good enough to acknowledge that. I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House recognise that it is in their hands to release that burden from people who simply do not deserve to have it thrust upon them.

Mr. Douglas Hogg: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. It may be for the convenience of the House to know that the standing veterinary committee has suspended until Monday. Good progress has been made today. I am grateful to the Commission for its proposal to lift the ban on gelatine, tallow and semen. I am also grateful to President Chirac and the French Government for their help. A number of other member states have now indicated their support. Some technical issues need further clarification, and I hope that the Commission's proposal can be adopted on Monday.

Dr. Strang: Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. We are grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for providing us with that information. It must be a considerable disappointment that the Commission's recommendation, albeit modest, was not even voted upon today. Does he agree with the Opposition that it is vital that at the meetings of the Council of Agriculture Ministers and the standing veterinary committee, which are to be resumed next week, we should get a clear demonstration of progress from the European Union, because we must get the overall ban lifted? We are merely talking about three products, which represent a minority of jobs.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. I cannot allow a debate on a point of order, but I know that those on the Government Front Bench will have heard the request from the Opposition spokesman, and no doubt those matters can be dealt with in the wind-up speeches or in tomorrow's debate.

6.58 pm

Sir Michael Spicer (South Worcestershire): I cannot resist making a brief comment on that announcement from my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister of Agriculture because it seems extraordinary that even the modest proposals of the Commission, which are supported with scientific argument, do not find a ready acceptance in a scientific committee. It has been suggested by several Opposition Members that the argument should be conducted solely on the grounds of science, yet one suspects that politics is playing a greater part than one might, at first glance, have imagined. It is clearly a disappointment and I hope that the matter will be put right speedily on Monday.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) said that he did not intend to talk much about the future of the common agricultural policy. I hope that the House will forgive me if in my brief remarks I speak about almost nothing else. My right hon. and learned Friend the Minister for Agriculture was right to begin by saying that one cannot talk about the agriculture industry without talking about the CAP. That is true not only in general but in the specific context of the crisis in the beef sector.

My right hon. and learned Friend also said that there is a need for urgent reform of the CAP. In saying that, he followed in the footsteps of Minister after Minister over the past 20 years. I have to absolve the Labour party from that charge because it would seem from the speech of the hon. Member for Edinburgh, East (Dr. Strang)—perhaps there will be other official speeches on the matter from the Labour party—that it is not concerned about reform of the CAP, which he did not mention. That must call into question Labour's motives, and the validity of its arguments, in calling for a vote at the end of this debate. If the Opposition have no alternatives to suggest for the future of agriculture, what would we be voting on? That is a phoney position that does them no good, but it is one to which we have become used. They have no alternative to offer to the CAP. Several Opposition Members have talked about strategy and generalities but nothing specific has been forthcoming. I suspect that they would not want to reform the CAP because they would want more of it—more centralisation, more protectionism and more taxpayers' money. That is the meaning of socialism, especially in economic and agricultural affairs.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Minister said that he wanted agricultural protection decoupled from production. He wanted a market-driven system and he wanted the argument that the status quo is not sustainable

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to be accepted. However, the status quo is precisely what we have got in the form of the appalling waste in our agricultural industry and the bizarre fact that we have fields that people are paid not to produce food in. Sometimes we have mountains or lakes of food, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir J. Spicer) said, on other occasions we have shortages. We have quotas that distort the position and intolerable waste that costs our taxpayers an increasing amount. The cost is running at about £6 billion a year on the agriculture industry alone, £2 billion of which is paid by our taxpayers to support not our industry but those of other countries. So much for changing the status quo.

If we consider how the status quo has evolved in the past two or three years, it is clear that the situation for the consumer is also intolerable. Every man, woman and child in this country effectively pays £250 per year more in food prices than they would have to were they able to benefit from world prices for agricultural produce. That is not just bad for the taxpayer and the consumer, but for the producer.

Hon. Members who represent agricultural constituencies and meet their National Farmers Union representatives regularly know that they believe that that situation is not sustainable. The agriculture industry rightly calls for security so that it can plan future production. If it has to plan production on the basis of gross distortions and massive injections of public funds—especially those going into other countries' pockets—and with consumers having to pay vastly too much because of the food mountains and set-aside fields it cannot be good for the long-term stability of British agriculture and production.

There are two basic problems with the CAP that must be addressed. First, we cannot for ever continue to run an industry by intervening in its price structure unless we are prepared to accept permanent distortions between supply and demand. There must be a better way to support agriculture, if that is what we want to do, than by interfering with the price mechanism, which inevitably causes distortions in supply and demand. It is the intervention in the price system that causes the great problems on the international front. It is not only that the industry is suffering domestically as I have described; there are vast international repercussions from the way in which it is being run.

A distorted, protectionist industry of the sort thrown up by the CAP is very bad for the developing world. The enormous tariffs of the CAP are often ignored. We have to pay twice as much for, say, New Zealand butter inside the boundaries of the CAP as we would if we were able to buy it at its genuine market price. That factor applies across the board to goods produced by developing countries. The CAP is bad for the poorer countries and for the rest of the world.

Tariffs are a serious problem. Much of the revenue that comes into the coffers of the European Union is dependent on moneys drawn from the tariffs. About a quarter of all moneys that come to the Union are derived from tariffs. The EU therefore has a vested interest, quite apart from its interest in protectionism, in maintaining a tariff structure around its agricultural production. That is one reason why the EU argues in the councils of the world, especially in GATT but also in the World Trade Organisation, for protectionism. The EU is one of the last bastions of protectionism—that was certainly true during the Uruguay round—because it is motivated not only by the philosophy of protectionism but by the revenues derived from it.

Mention has been made of the effects of the CAP on EU enlargement. My right hon. and learned Friend the Minister argued that enlargement to include the east European countries that desperately depend on getting their products into a protectionist Europe would have implications for reforming the CAP. One could argue that point the other way round by saying that one reason why Europe is so slow to allow those countries to join is precisely because of its fear that the CAP will be fundamentally affected. Of course, under the present way of doing things, it would.

The price distorting element is one major problem of the CAP, another is its pooling nature. Why should Britain put money into a central coffer when one third of it—£2 billion—is taken out to pay other countries for which we as politicians representing our constituencies in this Parliament have no responsibility? Why should 85 per cent.—once one has taken into account the rebate lost—of all the moneys that the European Union kindly allows us in the case of the BSE crisis come from our own taxpayers? Why should we go through the process of cycling money through a bureaucracy, wasting it as we go along, in order simply to fulfil the requirements of the CAP?

It was pointed out earlier that common policies applied in different circumstances have different effects. The milk quota is a good example. The common policy on milk quotas had a different effect in Italy from in Britain where, from time to time, it has been extremely detrimental. We must deal with those two specific problems: price distortion and common pooling.

If we are to support agriculture—I suspect that it would be a common position in the House that British agriculture in many of its facets requires taxpayers' support—we should do so directly rather than through the price mechanism. That is the kind of reform that is needed.

Secondly, if taxpayers' money is to be used, the House of Commons and the British Government, and the Governments of other countries, must have a greater impact on the decisions about how that money is to be raised and spent. I cannot see how one can avoid, particularly in the context of spreading to eastern Europe, eventually returning to some system of national control over agricultural spending within an agricultural policy.

The frustration expressed on both sides of the House about the present system and the present beef crisis comes about largely because we have no real power. Different hon. Members have spoken about different ways of dealing with the matter. One hon. Member says we should be rational, another that we should be much tougher and another that we should use retaliatory measures. All have the common theme that we are dealing with a power which is outside our control. We are not even sure about the extent of our influence. Even when it comes to scientific arguments we are not sure whether we will have any influence. We shall be waiting over the weekend to see whether rational arguments will work on that limited front. However, we do know that the ultimate decisions are not being taken as a direct response to our views and the votes of the House. They do not count. That is why there is no point in having a vote on the matter.

If we are really concerned about our constituents and our agriculture industry there must at some point be a recognition that we must regain some greater say, some greater influence, in the direct expenditures that we make or do not make—as we decide—on our agriculture industry. That will be good for our consumers, taxpayers and, above all, our agriculture industry.

7.12 pm

Mr. Alan W. Williams (Carmarthen): I want to make a few comments on the effects of BSE in my constituency. I have a rural seat, which is relatively sparsely populated. I claim to have more farmers in my constituency that any other Labour Member, and probably more than any Conservative Member as well. Farms in Wales are generally small family farms, and are, in my area, because of the grasslands, dairy, beef and lamb. Therefore, the crisis that has unfolded in the past few weeks has hit my constituency as badly as any. The livelihoods of individual farmers are at risk. They do not know what has hit them, and they cannot see any quick way out of the problems.

In addition, the crisis has had knock-on effects for farm suppliers, whether of feedstuffs, fertilisers, tractors, or cars. There is a substantial multiplier effect. A couple of weeks ago, I visited a factory in my constituency which makes sheds for farmers and constructs them throughout England, Wales and Scotland. Before the crisis, it had a good order book and employed 55 people who worked masses of overtime, each worker working 50 or 60 hours a week. It has had to make several of its staff redundant because of order cancellations, and is down to 40 staff and no overtime, and, effectively, down to half its previous turnover.

The first key point to make about the crisis is that the farmers themselves are not to blame. I am convinced that it is due to the animal feedstuffs. Back in 1989, I read the Southwood report and went through the alternative hypotheses. Like Professor Southwood, I was persuaded that contaminated feed is the primary cause of BSE.

The responsibility for that lies with the Government, who, in 1980, deregulated the animal feed industry, allowing lower temperatures and the scrapie virus thus to be transformed into BSE. It has come as a deep shock to consumers that animal feed contains recycled dead animals, chicken manure and such products. That is part of the consumer boycott.

This morning, I read a press release dated 9 May about animal feed contents which the NFU in Wales sent to all Members of Parliament this week. It says:

> "The NFU has long held the belief that animal feed contents should be freely available to farmers when making purchasing decisions. We have been both disappointed and angry that Government refused to introduced a statutory declaration of contents when pressed by the NFU in the mid-1980's—the tragic consequences of this inaction are now all too apparent."

Farmers, in buying their animal feed, cannot check what is in it, and the Government refuse to introduce the necessary legislation. Therefore, farmers are not guilty of the awful crisis that has come upon the industry, so they deserve full and proper compensation for the huge losses that they are now incurring.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Has the hon. Gentleman seen the announcement from the United Kingdom Agricultural Supply Trade Association that, at long last, it has decided to do what any sensible person would do, which is to publish what it is putting into the feed? Surely that is the responsibility of that organisation and the feed manufacturers, rather than the Government by regulation.

Mr. Williams: I should be delighted if all animal feed manufacturers did that voluntarily. But if we go back to the farmers and the NFU, the pressure was there 10 years ago to introduce exactly what now may be happening voluntarily.

During the past four or five weeks, I have been appalled by the way in which blame for the crisis has been directed more and more at the European Community, as if it were a European problem. BSE is very much a British invention and a British disease—indeed, it is a Conservative Government disease. The Government's figures for the incidence of BSE worldwide show that the total number of cases in Britain is 161,663, while the total for the rest of the world is 383—a difference of a factor of 400. Switzerland has 205 cases because it imported animal feeding stuffs made in Britain in the 1980s. All the other figures are very small. France has 13 cases, Germany has four and Italy has two. We keep hearing the appalling untruth that other European countries have BSE. They do, but a tiny number of cases. We have 161,000 cases—it is a British problem.

Today, we have been lobbied by some 300 farmers from all across Britain, who have been organised by the NFU. Some 30 or 40 of those farmers came from Wales. I wish to remind the House of something that happened in Milan last Wednesday which was under-reported. The BBC "Nine o'clock News" broadcast a report of a demonstration by 150,000 farmers in Milan—that shows their feelings about the crisis.

There has been a 50 per cent. fall in demand for Italian beef in the Italian market, and no compensation has been paid to farmers. Italy has had two cases of BSE, both in cattle imported from Britain. We try to blame Italy and Germany for our problems, but we have created problems for them. We should go to the European Union negotiations in Brussels with an air of great humility, contrition and remorse. It is our problem—we have devastated the European beef market, as well as causing great problems in our own.

There is no quick solution to the problem, and I have been appalled by the talk in the House of the possibility of retaliatory action. That will only multiply the crisis. We cannot simply ban European, Argentine or American beef because of alleged hormones in it. I find it contradictory that the very people who are advocating such a course of action are, at the same time, advocating taking on the European Union in the European Court and challenging the legality of the ban. We should not up the stakes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes) said today that we must sit at the table—for weeks on end, if need be—with our European partners and go through the scientific evidence that SEAC has studied with other countries' veterinary experts and Health Ministers. If it takes six weeks or six months to lift the ban, so be it. We must move forward by way of civilised discussions and rational consideration, and human health must be the priority.

Our European colleagues have made it clear that, if the ban is to be lifted, we must show that we have a series of measures aimed at eradicating BSE. That should have

[Mr. Williams]

been our aim in 1986 when the disease was discovered. Had the Government followed the course pressed upon them by my hon. Friends the Members for South Shields (Dr. Clark) and for Caerphilly (Mr. Davies)—who is in his place—and by other Opposition Members during the debates in 1988, 1990 and 1991, we would not be in this appalling mess now.

There is now general agreement about the culling of dairy cows as they end their economic lives, as it is older animals that contract BSE. Taking them out of the food chain is a rational and sensible first step. This afternoon, those of us who met the farmers—I am sorry that the Minister did not take part—were made aware of the chaos in the few weeks following the introduction of the culling scheme. I was told that, in Wales, it is only in the past four or five days that any kind of slaughter has take place, and the figure is now up to about 90 a day. There are only two abattoirs involved, and there are no rendering facilities in Wales.

I am not clear what will happen to the carcases following the slaughter. Some 20,000 cattle a week are to be slaughtered, but, in an article in *Farming News* on 2 April, a spokesman for the Meat and Livestock Commission said:

"At present, we only have capacity for 2,000 a week."

What will happen to the carcases? That is a real problem, and it appears again that the Government have not thought it through. We must expand the cold storage capacity, but that is a temporary measure. Although it allows slaughter to take place, it does not affect the final disposal of the carcases. One of my concerns is that the Government will simply introduce landfill, and the farming community certainly does not want that. There could well be serious environmental problems if that was done.

I was told by farmers today that, following the chaos of the past two or three weeks, the stories that appeared in the press have carried to Europe, and have provided no help in terms of lifting the European ban. Our infrastructure and style of government are so appallingly inept that problems and bottlenecks are created. Unless we show that we can govern this country responsibly and achieve what we set out to achieve, no one will have confidence that our beef is of a high quality.

The Minister went to Brussels on 15 April to propose the slaughter of 40,000 selected animals—it is not clear how those animals most at risk were to be identified. But the right hon. and learned Gentleman's proposal was turned down as inadequate. Some 40,000 out of a livestock of 12 million cattle amounts to one third of 1 per cent., and we will not convince Europe by offering one third of 1 per cent. of our cattle for sacrifice.

I hope that the Government are working on a selected slaughter policy in close consultation with our European partners. But in France, Ireland, Italy and Germany, when a case of BSE is confirmed, the whole herd is slaughtered. I would not advocate that, as it would mean that 90 per cent. of the animals killed would be perfectly healthy. There would be appalling logistical problems and knock-on effects in other parts of the dairy industry.

It is clear that it is as urgent now as it always was to develop a test for BSE in live animals. We advocated that during the 1990 debates. Dr. Harash Narang, a Newcastle virologist, was sacked for trying to develop this very kind of test. I remember my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) opening a debate in 1990 with the story of the appalling persecution of this distinguished scientist, simply for wanting to develop a test for BSE in live animals.

The Government simply did not want to know. BSE was to be swept under the carpet, but six years later it has come back to haunt us.

Dr. Harash Narang is still working on a test, and the Government have set up a small company, Electrophonetics, which is also trying to develop a test. The same goes for a company in Macclesfield. In the United States, the National Institute of Health in Maryland, near Washington, has come up with a test for CJD in live people. It is a complicated test involving a lumbar puncture. It may not be useful for cattle, but it points the way to developing a test for BSE in live animals.

If the Government were really serious about eradicating BSE—Germany, France and Italy would be—they would implement a crash programme in which, over the next three months, MAFF would sponsor every research scientist with expertise in this disease in an attempt urgently to develop a test for BSE in live animals. It could then be available by the end of the summer. All cattle could be tested, and any carrying traces of BSE could be slaughtered. After another three or six months, all animals could be re-tested, and within two or three years the disease could be eradicated.

The Government should also sponsor research into the link between BSE and CJD. Over the years, they have tried to pretend that there is no conceivable risk of any such link. The Minister for Health used the word "inconceivable" last November. It is clear now that such a guarantee should never have been given—there was always the danger of the disease jumping species. About 200 cats have died of mad cat disease, and about 20 species of animal have contracted spongiform-like illnesses from eating meat contaminated by BSE.

Until the early 1990s, such research work was a no-go area for the Government. In a parliamentary answer dated 10 May, I was informed that the budget allocated by the Department of Health and the Medical Research Council to CJD's possible links with BSE used to be less than £1 million a year. Of course, it has now been stepped up. A failure to invest more earlier has therefore resulted in a cost of £1 billion a year from now on.

We need to continue discussions of the evidence with our European partners to determine how great or trivial this risk of jumping species may be. We do not know at present.

Mr. William Ross: I thought I heard the hon. Gentleman say a few moments ago that about 20 species of animal have contracted BSE-type diseases from eating meat. Given the dangers of inaccurate language in this debate, would he care to reconsider his words? Is he referring to eating muscle, or to eating brains and other parts in which the BSE prion is found?

Mr. Williams: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's interruption. As soon as I had said it, I realised my inaccuracy. Some of the animals to which I referred accidentally contracted the disease by consuming whatever is in their diet of beef products; most of the

others were in laboratories in which their brains were injected with the virus to see whether they would develop the disease.

The Southwood committee and the Labour party in 1990 advocated beginning work on the risk of primates contracting BSE, both by consuming beef and by being injected. The work, however, was never done, because the Government did not want to know.

As I say, we still do not know the extent of the risk of the disease jumping species. This morning, I carefully read a document prepared for parliamentarians by the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. Three or four pages of this excellent 12-page document are given over to the risk of transmitting CJD. Hysterical figures are sometimes quoted in the popular press, but this careful academic analysis offers no real conclusions or solutions, and does not tell us the size of the problem.

On 20 March, 10 cases were announced. The *Observer* of 28 April listed another nine cases that had come to light in the past few weeks. Last week, I asked the Government how many confirmed and suspected cases there now were. They told me of 11 confirmed cases, but chose not to give any figure for suspected cases. My feeling is that there could be 100 or even 1,000 cases in the next few years. The media have carried figures as high as 100,000. If they are true, we are entering an appalling nightmare. My belief, for what it is worth, is that hundreds will be involved. I have told farmers in my constituency to be resilient as more and more stories of cases of the new strain of CJD come to light.

If it proves, in 10 years' time, that only 1,000 people have contracted the disease, I will agree with what the Minister for Health said a few weeks ago. If he had £100 million to hand, he said, he could save far more lives than that with preventive medicine. A thousand people are not many compared with the numbers who die of lung and breast cancer and heart disease, for instance.

It appears, then, that, because of a loss of customer confidence, we have been driven to a policy of slaughtering all cattle that would otherwise have gone into the food chain at the end of their lives, and compensating farmers for that will result in a bill of £1 billion a year. The tragedy is that that money will be spent for very little health gain, and that relatively few people will ever die of CJD.

The Government's blundering ineptitude throughout the past 10 years, in ignoring the problem and not tackling it—not doing research on transmission and so on—has caused the crisis. Their ineptitude has caused the appalling crisis of confidence, the difficult relations with the European Community and so on. We are paying the price for a decade of extremely bad government. *[Interruption.]* If the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) wishes to intervene instead of making sedentary remarks, I shall be happy to give way.

It is very sad that the farming community—my constituents—are in deep despond as a result of a problem that should never have run out of control in the way that it has. The bills for this piece of appalling misgovernment will fall, for years, to an incoming Labour Government.

7.40 pm

Mr. Nicholas Baker (North Dorset): If the hon. Member for Carmarthen (Mr. Williams), who I believe is a distinguished scientist, can make a speech based on so little attention to the scientific evidence and containing so much mere speculation, I am not surprised that, when he asks his farmers to be resilient, they look the other way.

It is undoubted that the BSE crisis has affected the beef industry and the rural community in a way that it is hard to underestimate. Our beef producers found themselves engulfed in a forest fire. I shall say a word in a moment about why it came about.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health had no alternative but to publish the evidence of SEAC as they did, but the way in which that evidence has been used and treated by others deserves a moment's attention.

No one could seriously argue that my right hon. and learned Friend's package is not an adequate and appropriate response to the situation. It has contributed, and is contributing, to the greater confidence in British beef, the results of which we are witnessing. I am delighted to welcome Asda's decision tonight to sell British beef in its shops.

Another factor in the package was the close consultation with the National Farmers Union at all times. The suggestion that such a package could be worked out in two minutes, or even in days, is an insult to the drama and gravity of the situation and fails to recognise what our farmers face.

I do not accept that the crisis was foreseeable or that the package should have been prepared and held in a drawer in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, as the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) appeared to suggest. Had such a package been prepared, the criticism that sinister moves were afoot, that full scientific evidence was being withheld by the Government and that further measures were necessary would undoubtedly have been levelled from the Opposition Benches—to some extent understandably.

The crisis was unmeasurable, and nothing that has been discussed in the debate could lead anyone to think that it was measurable or other than unpredictable and irrational, but it was magnified by three factors.

The first factor was the way in which the national media covered the matter. Like ghouls, they switched their excessive and unbalanced three pages per edition from one tragedy in Scotland to BSE, and savaged everyone involved as much as they could in search of damage resulting from the crisis. As a result of the way in which the media handled the matter, they infected their European colleagues. That led to the second factor in the crisis—the European and worldwide ban.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Baker: I shall make some progress, if I may.

The European and worldwide ban has undoubtedly had a dramatic effect on consumer confidence. I add my support to the efforts that my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister of Agriculture is making to have the ban removed. As long as there is progress in the negotiations, he is right to proceed with them.

The reasoning behind the bans is unscientific, as was the hysteria that gave rise to them. The bans have, ironically, helped bring about a drop in beef consumption

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which in many European countries is greater than in Britain. The damage to those countries' beef industries must be enormous. I welcome the progress that my right hon. and learned Friend announced earlier on the three-product ban that seems to have been made in the continuing negotiations. I hope that that mini-ban will be concluded on Monday, when we find out the result of the scientific committee's deliberations. The bans were born of hysteria, bred out of continental media by the British national media, and their removal is in the interest of all the countries concerned.

The third man—or, dare I say it, woman—among the factors contributing to the hysteria was the hon. Member for Peckham (Ms Harman). I am sorry that the name of Peckham, which I once hoped to represent, should be tarnished in that way. I deplore the principle that political points should be scored and attacks made on the Government by attacking an institution such as our beef industry. My hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) reminded us of the words that were used on that occasion, which undoubtedly did much damage in the community at large and to our beef industry.

Mr. Prentice: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Baker: I am sorry. I know that many others wish to speak, and I do not want to be distracted at the moment.

My hon. Friend the Minister of State is playing a directing part through his daily industry meetings, as he explained to us. He should not hesitate to bang heads together when necessary. He has no absolute control, as some hon. Members would like, but he has influence, and he controls some of the purse strings and has licensing powers. He should use those powers boldly where necessary. He does not have large bodies of administrators with the power to spread an expensive bureaucracy over the problem, which some hon. Members would like, but the hard-pressed beef industry is entitled to expect the co-operation of the entire community at this time of need. I hope that, in due course, my hon. Friend will visit the west country, but his first duty remains to get this package up and running, which it has started to be, we are pleased to hear, in the past 24 hours.

It is no use complaining that the Government do not control the beef industry or the farming community generally. Of course they do not, and only the Labour party might want them to. All members of the farming community have a part to play, and I hope that the urgency of wide, effective co-operation will be understood by all those involved.

The NFU team in Dorset is doing well in co-ordinating advice, information, complaints and the concerns of their members, which we Members of Parliament for Dorset have done our best to communicate along the channel. I pay tribute to the work of the NFU in my constituency.

I shall give a small example of the way in which the community in my constituency is helping. There is a very good small abattoir at Sturminster Newton, which is empowered only to deal with the calf cull. Instead of insisting on its normal terms of trade—payment in two or three weeks—it is paying on the nail to all farmers who bring their calves for the cull. I recommend such co-operation to the community at large.

One producer who is prominent in my constituency has illustrated how, on sales on 2 May and 9 May of prime beef cattle from his clean herd, the entire profit has gone. That picture is reflected by other beef producers. He has sold his cattle at a loss. Ironically, if they had all been over 30 months, they would have fetched more money and his loss would almost have disappeared. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister of State will consider ways of helping beef producers in that situation—and, indeed, other parties in the food chain. I understand that profits on food sales are currently level and steady; those other parties have at least some responsibility for giving assistance.

I should like briefly to mention some matters that concern our constituents. Some were referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Dorset, West (Sir J. Spicer) in his excellent speech. The first, which is urgent, is casualty slaughter; the second is the working of the intervention system, which might well be used more than it is; the third is a greater slaughter capacity in our part of the world—I was pleased to learn that capacity is to be expanded in west Dorset—and, finally, there is the position of producers of clean beef from cattle aged under 30 months.

I am certain that the way forward is to continue to ensure that British beef is the safest in the world, not to be afraid to articulate that, and to mobilise support in every quarter. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Dorset, West, I want consumers to understand the quality and advantages of British beef. Let retailers and restaurants supply British beef, and I—along with some of my hon. Friends—will continue to try to promote the campaign by consumers.

The battle for confidence is being won. It is a battle that is vital to the future of our excellent beef industry.

7.51 pm

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): I am glad to be able to contribute to the debate, because I represent a rural Welsh constituency where the sheep, beef and dairy sectors are important and because two of my constituents have died from CJD. That brings the matter into focus. I shall talk about the current crisis later; first, however—as this is a general European agriculture debate—I shall deal with wider matters.

We face a challenge. There is a need for renewal, and a need to help young people to feel that there is a future in agriculture and that it is worth entering the industry. We need to help farmers to retire from an aging industry by devising appropriate schemes. Special assistance is also needed. At the next meeting of the Council of Ministers, will the Government propose additional help for beef farmers, perhaps through a flat-rate supplement to the beef special premium and the suckler cow allowance throughout the European Union? The Government have the power to top up the allowance by £21.41, and I ask them to use that power. Other member states do so. That would at least allow us a more level playing field.

There is also the environmental dimension. I was appalled when, launching the new Environment Agency in Bangor on 27 March, the Secretary of State for Wales did not refer to the central role that farmers play as guardians of the countryside. Environmental schemes need to be adapted in Wales. I recall that, when the common agricultural policy was reformed in 1992, environmental schemes were introduced as

"accompanying measures" to encourage environmentally sensitive farming. All farmers have been subject to the CAP reform, but only some in Wales have had access to environmental schemes such as the Tyr Cymen and environmentally sensitive area schemes. We should now be given voluntary, comprehensive access to schemes for environmental enhancement: that would help Welsh farmers through a difficult time.

We face a number of changes. There are the changes in the general agreement on tariffs and trade, with further World Trade Organisation negotiations lasting until 1999, and the European Union is to be enlarged. We shall need to ensure that financial resources are targeted properly. We often hear the Government speak of that in other contexts. Those resources should be targeted to support the farmers who are most in need, and to maximise the number of viable holdings. Such a strategy would be good for the rural economy.

The Ministry's performance over the past two months can only be described as abysmal: if it were in the private sector, all its members would have been fired for crass incompetence. Vulnerable small farmers in Wales are having to pay the price, as, indeed, are farmers elsewhere—and not only farmers, but those employed in abattoirs, processing and the transport sectors. We have heard about that from other hon. Members.

First, the Ministry and the Department of Health failed to co-ordinate a coherent response following the announcement of 20 March. The Government also failed to get our European Union partners on side before the announcement and to announce a package of measures on the same day, which would have avoided some of the market panic that has taken place. Secondly, it was scandalous that, having decided to go for the cull of cattle aged over 30 months, the Government did not work out the detailed methods of operation. Furthermore, after the scheme had been decided on and slaughter locations and pick-up points had been specified, it was discovered that the list was spurious because, apparently, of a lack of rendering, transport and freezing capacity. All three of those excuses were given during Monday night's debate.

My constituency, Caernarfon, contains a small company, Cwmni Cig Arfon—a new, modern abattoir. Last Thursday, the intervention board told the company that it was on the final list of 20 companies that would slaughter cattle over 30 months. On Friday morning, the Welsh Office vet gave the company the details of the procedures that should be followed, and the other necessary information. He said that only five abattoirs in the United Kingdom would be allowed to slaughter the cattle, and that it was one of the five. The company was, of course, very pleased. On Friday afternoon, a farmer telephoned the Welsh Office help line and was told that there were two slaughterhouses in Wales, in Caernarfon and Abergavenny.

By Saturday morning, the story had changed. The company was told that it was not clear whether it was on the list. On Monday of this week, it was told that it was definitely not. When the company asked for an explanation, it was told, "We got the wrong place in Wales." That sums up the whole saga. Only one word can adequately describe such a chain of events: "shambles". I believe that the derivation of that word has links with slaughterhouses; it is clearly living up to its etymology.

The abattoir in Caernarfon went to the trouble and expense of trying to establish arrangements to take cattle aged over 30 months quickly, but to no avail. The only explanation that I can find is that the renderers, not the Government, are in the driving seat, and are being allowed to overturn Government decisions with impunity. Ministers may claim—and I acknowledge the point—that the renderers are the bottleneck and therefore have the whip hand, but that was known as long ago as March, when the issue was first addressed. It was recognised then that the renderers were likely to be the bottleneck. What was done at that initial stage to bring greater rendering capacity, or at least incinerating capacity, on stream, or to devise a strategy to deal with the animals? That might have taken weeks, but if urgent go-aheads had been given in March, we would be that much closer to a solution—two months closer, in fact.

What was done to bring back into use, on an urgent basis, the frozen store capacity that is available? I understand that there is considerable capacity under the control of the Ministry of Defence. I have the impression that the Government were themselves frozen into a posture of total impotence, and were not prepared to interfere with the free market to which they are so dogmatically attached. I also have the impression that there was no overall command or co-ordination of the efforts to overcome the logistical problems. Even at this stage, I call on MAFF and the Welsh Office—who are generally, although not tonight, the invisible partners in this whole sorry charade as far as Wales is concerned—to set up proper co-ordinating machinery. The Minister's assurances to the House about the prospects of progress in Wales, given only last Monday, have been shown to be worthless.

Mr. Cynog Dafis (Ceredigion and Pembroke, North): May I remind the Minister that, in my constituency, rendering capacity is currently idle, but is capable of taking 1,000 animals a week? The plant involved was operating until recently; if it could be returned to operation expeditiously, it would prove extremely valuable in a large area and could take animals from adjacent slaughterhouses that were originally to be designated as appropriate places for culled cattle.

Mr. Wigley: The figures that my hon. Friend has quoted put what is happening into perspective. The present capacity of one of the two slaughterhouses to be identified in Wales—in Abergavenny—is only 100 animals a day. The other location that has been identified in the first minimal list that has been given the go ahead is Gaerwen in Anglesey. Although it was named on Monday as one of the slaughterhouses where progress would be made this week, so far no slaughtering has occurred there because no rendering capacity has been made available to remove the corpses. From what I have been told, there will be no such slaughtering in Gaerwen this week. The first week of the programme, which was announced only last Monday, has clearly failed.

This week, not one slaughterhouse in north Wales is acting as the Government said it would. Apparently, we shall have to look to Shrewsbury, over the border from mid Wales, but it is taking only a small proportion of its animals from Wales and is giving priority to its normal list of customers. I understand that the slaughterhouse in Shrewsbury—which was to be Wales's salvation—has

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been offered 2,000 animals this week, and has accepted 35. The programme, which was sold to the House on Monday as a coherent answer to the problems, is breaking down. Farmers face uncertainty and there is no coherent leadership.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion and Pembroke, North (Mr. Dafis) said, that problem exists in north Wales because Gaerwen is not operational, while in Dyfed there is no slaughtering capacity. That is absurd, because there are at least three slaughterhouses in Dyfed ready to begin—Oriel Jones in Llanybydder, Dewi James in Cardigan and TWM Meat of Felinfoel, Llanelli. TWM Meat has arranged cold storage, but it is not in the scheme, which makes the mind boggle.

On Monday, the Minister said that the slaughter rate for England and Wales would be 18,000 this week. On the basis of what we have experienced in Wales, that figure seems grossly optimistic. Even if the rate of 18,000 a week were achieved, it would take months, perhaps years, to eliminate the backlog that is building up. If further culling is demanded, there will not be a hope in hell of carrying it out on the basis of what is currently being provided.

The Government's inability to develop a successful slaughter programme has left farmers with animals that are more than 30 months old. They would normally have been sold. They are still consuming fodder that should have been available for younger animals. That difficulty is compounded by a late spring and a low growth rate. Farmers are having to buy more feed to keep their animals alive because they cannot be taken on for slaughter. They therefore face higher costs although their income is lower than expected owing to the price reductions. As a result, they face a cash flow crisis.

There are financial implications for many farmers. Most farms in Wales are small; we are talking about subsistence farming, not fat cats. Many are small family farms where the family depends on family credit to survive. The price for animals taken to market is running at about 103p per kilogram—as against an expected price of 125p, or perhaps 130p for a good animal. That difference—of 20p per kilogram—makes the difference between survival and failure for many farmers. They will have worked for nothing over the winter as they will not get back what they have paid out, and they will be unable to pay their bills.

It was not until last Thursday that farmers in my constituency received their first letter from the Welsh Office or the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food telling them what had happened—seven weeks after the crisis broke. I do not expect the Minister to write 30,000 letters in his own hand, as was suggested earlier in the debate, but there has been a breakdown in communications, which has compounded the uncertainty felt by the industry.

Many problems have been compounded by a partial understanding arising from lack of information. The Minister will be aware that three large supermarket chains in the United Kingdom have said that they will not take any meat from abattoirs involved in selective culling. That is a disgraceful attitude and it could undermine the Government's programme. When the Minister winds up the debate, will he say what the Government will do to try to knock sense into the directors of those companies that are taking such a stupid approach?

We all need to convey the message that we recognise the quality of the beef that we are producing and know that it is completely safe to eat. On that basis, the ban should be lifted. I am glad that my county council, the new Gwynedd county council, was the first authority in Wales to lift the ban in schools and at least give parents and schools a choice.

Those who advocate the culling of whole herds, as has been suggested in some quarters, are speaking nonsense. No one can claim that BSE moves laterally between live animals in a herd, and it makes no sense to cull a herd. To cull a whole herd because one case of BSE has occurred would be nothing short of a witch hunt such as that which occurred during the second world war. Then, if the resistance killed a German soldier, the SS would shoot 100 innocent men from the town or village. It would be just as senseless to cull a whole a herd because there had been one instance of BSE. The Nazis adopted that approach to teach a lesson to potential resistance activists, but it is nonsense to suggest that cows will be frightened into not catching BSE if such action is taken against them. It is more likely that, in those circumstances, farmers will be frightened to admit that they have BSE on their farms, which would be serious. The culling of entire herds would destroy the Welsh dairy industry at a stroke and I urge Ministers to resist any such suggestions.

The 30-month rule is inflexible. It is difficult to identify the date at which an animal reaches 30 months of age because full records may not be available. Vets tell me that they can identify a 33-month-old animal from its tooth development, but not a 30-month-old one. Different breeds mature at different rates. Many argue that some breeds take up to 36 months to reach the same stage of development as others reach at 30 months. The scheme needs to be flexible. I know that a consultation document has been produced, and I urge the Government to introduce flexibility into the scheme. If they do not, farmers will be tempted to fatten cows to go to market earlier than usual and the meat quality will suffer, which will not be good for the industry in the long term.

The approach being taken is scientifically unfair. One of my constituents, a farmer, has never had a case of BSE. He breeds his own suckler herd and feeds them on silage and home-grown barley. He has still had to slaughter a perfectly fit 30-month-old animal, which seems crazy. Some hon. Members and some of the mindless media try to project the problem as one created by the European Union. A few moments ago, an hon. Member rushed into the Chamber thinking that he had bad news from Brussels; there was joy on his face as he proclaimed the bad news to the House. It is nonsense to take such an approach. Sadly, the United Kingdom, not its European Union partners, has suffered 160,000 cases of BSE. Individual states, not the Commission, are taking the hardest line. If we were not members of the EU, those states would still take a hard line and we would not receive the 70 per cent.—or whatever the net figure is—financial contribution towards the cost of compensating farmers. We would have to negotiate with each and every member state bilaterally. To blame the EU for our predicament is scapegoating of the worst xenophobic sort. To threaten retaliation against the EU is mindless and can only worsen the farmers' plight.

Discussions this week in the Select Committee on Agriculture, whose members are visiting some of the other member states, give reason to believe that the French Government are willing to see a step-by-step lifting of the ban. The announcement in mid-debate by the Minister is a material indication of what is happening in today's negotiations in Brussels. If agreement on this matter is to be achieved, it will be by diplomacy, not by the ranting of the loony right, which will only undermine the prospects for an end to the ban.

I emphasise the danger of escalating the war of words with the European Union. The main market for Welsh lamb is the EU. Consignments of lamb have already—wrongly—been blocked in Italy and Spain. It is to be hoped that those are isolated incidents and that they will not become a pattern, but if the vicious anti-EU propaganda continues to pump out of the Chamber and out of London's press, there could be a real danger of escalation that goes beyond beef products. July is the critical month for Welsh lamb sales, and if the European market is poisoned by that time, not by BSE but by the venomous speeches of little Englanders in this Chamber, there could be a devastating knock-on effect on the sheep sector in Wales.

I shall now deal with the knock-on effect on the dairy sector. Will the Minister confirm that, following the BSE crisis, section 3J of the intervention board milk quota guidelines, which deal with temporary reallocation following herd movement restrictions, will come into play? Will he also confirm that additional quota will be given to milk producers who are likely to exceed their existing quota as a direct result of the restrictions that are being placed on them? I should be glad of a statement in the Minister's winding-up speech—or one tomorrow—on that matter, which could have a material effect on a creamery in my constituency.

I issue a warning on an associated matter. Ministers said a short time ago that we may import beef from third-world countries to keep pie factories going. In view of the controls on British herds, we should be assured that imported animals are from BSE-free herds; that they are not being given hormones that are banned here; and that the meat has not been affected by the over-use of organophosphates such as for tsetse fly control. If our farmers are rightly shackled by rules and regulations to protect the consumer, the consumer has every right to expect the same protection in the context of meat from other parts of the world. If that does not happen, the consumer will be in danger of going out of the UK frying pan into an even worse, unknown global fireplace.

Consumers need full information on the contents of the food that they buy. The farmer also needs information on the content of animal feed. Consumers and farmers need detailed background information about beef for consumption. The national milk records organisation has proposed a national cattle database which would certainly improve traceability and would make the management of disease much easier. I ask the Government to pay attention to that proposal.

The Minister said that he had some sympathy for those who have lost their jobs. He probably has: his job is on the line. In view of the total failure of MAFF and the Welsh Office to create a viable system to cope with the BSE crisis and the culling programme that the Minister devised, I call for the creation of a co-ordinating executive body, possibly based on the intervention board, to take control of the culling programme. The Government have badly let down the farmers through sheer incompetence. It is time for resignations. If they are not voluntary, the House should insist upon them.

8.13 pm

Mr. Peter Temple-Morris (Leominster): Obviously I do not agree with the hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) about the Government and the Minister of Agriculture. However, I say without reservation that it is a pleasure to follow him. As he knows, I was born in Wales and I have some knowledge of the importance to Wales of farming and of its small farmers. On the other side of the border, I represent some 800 square miles of English farming territory.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Caernarfon for referring in some detail to the slaughtering capacity in the border area because that makes it easier for me to make a point more quickly than would otherwise have been the case. Herefordshire has no operational, designated abattoir. One has been designated, Williams of Weobley, but having been designated, it cannot be serviced by the renderers. As we all know, that is the major part of the problem. I join hon. Members in spurring the Government on to increase rendering capacity and to move the beasts through the abattoirs by increasing cold storage capacity.

My 800 square miles of border country has many farmers, some of them small, and livestock producers. It is the home of the Hereford breed, and perhaps that says it all. My farmers, in common with those of other hon. Members, have had a dreadful time. Many of them may be ruined and more will go out of business as a result of what has happened, which is far from over. My meetings with farmers have led to fairly vigorous exchanges, but farmers generally have been calm and reasonable in the face of the problems that they are trying to deal with. A tribute is due to them and to the National Farmers Union and the Country Landowners Association for the quality of their leadership in a difficult situation.

The nation has to hang together in dealing with our friends in Europe, but our farmers need to see a way ahead and they need to be kept afloat during these bad times. They are grateful for the assistance that has already been given, but there may be a case for more. I shall specify those areas in which further help is needed and concentrate on the prime beef producer, the person who is not picking up a milk cheque but whose livelihood is being grossly undervalued by the market and who receives no subsidies. Before coming to that, I should like to deal with three issues.

First, the country has contributed to the making of the crisis. We had an emergency on our hands, and from it we have created a first-class crisis for beef producers in all parts of the United Kingdom and in Europe. I am not referring to the Government, but to the beginnings of the crisis. The press leak to the *Daily Mirror*, which my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir J. Spicer) mentioned, about the SEAC meeting in Edinburgh was quite deplorable. That led to a chain reaction and the general press treatment of the matter was equally deplorable.

In the media, the issue was sensationalised and dramatised and matters that would have better put moderately were put in an extreme way. The dear old foot and mouth photograph from, I think, 1967—showing

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hooves sticking in the air as cattle were burned in the fields—was trundled out and printed in the tabloids yet again.

I would be the last to criticise the scientists who have carried out valuable work, but some of them have little media experience. By and large, what they said on the media was cut into soundbites. One scientist gave the nation the impression that it faced a first-class general epidemic, which was about as unhelpful in this difficult area as anything could be. My final criticism—which is directed into the past although it is necessary to say it—is that there was a panicky and somewhat irresponsible immediate reaction by the representatives of some consumer organisations. They could not get on "Newsnight" quickly enough to condemn the entire British beef industry and to give the nation the impression that it would never be right or safe to eat beef again.

I am pleased that the good citizens of Herefordshire did not succumb to that panicky reaction. In fact, on the Friday and Saturday of the week of the initial announcement, some supermarkets had the good sense to lower the price of beef and their shelves became bare quite quickly. I believe that the British people have a sound reserve of calm and good sense.

Mr. Dalyell: The hon. Gentleman is referring, partly, to the work of the neuropathogens unit in Edinburgh. I agree with him about the press. However, to be fair to the scientists concerned—one or two of whom are my constituents—they thought that they were doing a speculative, serious scientific job and they had absolutely no notion as to the purpose for which their work would be used. They are careful and serious people. I agree with a lot of what the hon. Gentleman has said.

Mr. Temple-Morris: I hope that I did not give the hon. Gentleman the impression that I was getting at those people. I was referring to the way in which certain comments were reported. Their work is both valuable and vital. The way in which that work was allowed to come into the public domain and the way that it was treated thereafter—mainly by the media—are far more at fault than one particular comment by one particular scientist.

Mr. Dalyell: One of the tragedies in all this is that those people were working on small animals—I wish the Minister would listen to this—as the Government had curtailed funding for the follow-up research that should have been done on the bigger animals.

Mr. Temple-Morris: I am pleased that I have allowed the hon. Gentleman to make some points to the Minister; I hope that he will now allow me to complete my speech. Secondly, there is no need for undue party politics in this issue—fortunately, it has not been abused in this debate. It is perfectly proper for the Opposition parties to criticise or make suggestions about things that are within our power to accomplish and to improve. However, when it comes to an approach to Europe, any criticism that might be made about approaches being in the wrong direction will be taken up by other European Ministers for agriculture who, for one reason or another, want to block us or to impede our progress. I welcome the spirit of the debate.

The third general point is that there is no need for Euro-bashing in this matter. It is quite insane. If we want the help of an organisation—without which we would be in a much worse mess—we should not attack it. These sorts of odd threats have crept into the media, coming from the usual anonymous commentators who abound in these corridors, and they are most unhelpful and do a lot of harm.

We have had two rather dramatic entries into the House by harbingers of misfortune. They have no doubt spent the entire evening watching the Press Association tape to be the first to regale us with the bad news. They regaled us by way of intervention and then left the House. Thanks to the Minister of Agriculture, we know that they got it utterly wrong.

Mr. Tyler: I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the two carrion crows who came into the House at such speed and disappeared again. When it is the usual suspects, Ministers from other Governments will not take much notice of what they say. The Conservative Governments of France and Germany must be aware that there are some curious people on the Government Back Bench. The chairman of the 1922 Committee—the right hon. Member for Shipley (Sir M. Fox)—has adopted the attitude that we have to bludgeon our colleagues in Europe into submission. Does the hon. Gentleman think that that approach has been helpful?

Mr. Temple-Morris: I cannot be seduced into having an internal debate at the behest of the hon. Gentleman. The chairman of the 1922 Committee is well known for his plain speaking Yorkshire views, which are often robust and, on occasion, do not have the quiet diplomacy of which other hon. Members are more capable.

I refer to the beef producer. We have heard a lot about the ban and about slaughtering capacity. I shall concentrate on the plight of the pure beef man, particularly the small producer. As I have already said, such people do not receive a milk cheque to get through this crisis. The under 30-month prime beef producer is selling into the market and, so far as I can see, he is taking a 20 per cent. loss on his beasts and the delays are causing more losses. The whole situation has become a disaster.

There is a need for some sort of top-up or deficiency payment in this area which can taper off as the market improves. I understand that this is happening and that the Government will approach the Commission in May in an effort to get European involvement in the scheme. We must have a scheme quickly. If we are to have any hope of getting European help and involvement, there must be British involvement as well.

Mr. Beggs: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me that the top-up must apply to heifer carcases as well as to steer carcases? All subsidies are currently directed towards steers.

Mr. Temple-Morris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for pointing that out and I agree with what he has said—in fact, I shall adopt it as part of the case that I am urging on the Government at the present time.

I refer to the more than 30-month prime beef producer. This is another area and it affects the same people. These people are obviously grateful for the 25p per kilo top-up.

However, one of the most tragic aspects of this tragic situation is that we are dealing with some of the nicest beef in this country. I refer to the specialist herds—Northern Ireland and Scotland have already been referred to in this regard. We need to have progress there. As part of the partial approach to lifting the ban, it would seem to me that that is a good candidate to lead in on.

The first matter is obviously gelatine, tallow and sperm. That avenue is open. From what my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister of Agriculture has said, the news there is not necessarily bad and it could be good. I should have thought that specialist herds would be dealt with next. In the meantime, we need to secure the support of the Commission and the support of the Government for further help in this area for those people.

There are other areas of general additional help. One that has not been mentioned is a generous approach to European Union discussion about increases via the beef special premium and the suckler cow premium. These are areas in which help can be given. So much for the limited aspect that I wanted to approach—I hope that I have not unnecessarily taken up the time of the House. I conclude by saying that the economic, financial and political ramifications of this crisis are very considerable. We need to progress with all due speed, and that progress has to be perceived by the public as well as being proclaimed by us.

8.29 pm

Mr. George Stevenson (Stoke–on–Trent, South): The hon. Member for South Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer) referred to the need to discuss the common agricultural policy. Today many hon. Members have concentrated on the BSE crisis but they have not referred to the common agricultural policy. The hon. Gentleman went on to comment about the waste, inefficiency and ineffectiveness of the CAP, and I agreed with many of his views. I shall concentrate my remarks on the common agricultural policy and, in that context, refer also to the BSE crisis.

The hon. Member for South Worcestershire lost me when he tried to blame the Labour party for the Government's failure to put down a motion upon which we can vote. I part company with him on that point because I fail to see how that is the Labour party's fault. I do not follow his logic. We parted company again when he implied that he wanted to remove the CAP altogether. The Labour party wants to see it reformed fundamentally.

I think that it is relevant to refer to the BSE crisis in the context of a debate about the common agricultural policy. I believe that the application of the common agricultural policy over the past 25 years has led to some serious problems. The CAP has adversely affected our agricultural environment: it has promoted risk-taking in the pursuit of maximum output and maximum profits. I do not suggest for one moment that farmers and producers have not had some good and some lean times over the years. However, I argue strongly that the common agricultural policy ethos is to produce as much as one can as quickly as possible in order to maximise profits. Inherent in that ethos is the real risk that shortcuts will be taken.

At the end of his speech, the hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) referred to the consumer. People the length and breadth of this country and in many European Union countries believe that the common agricultural policy has put the interests of the producer before those of the consumer. The correct balance has not been achieved.

In July 1992, the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) in his then capacity as Secretary of State for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food came to the House and claimed that the reformed common agricultural policy was good for the taxpayer, the farmer and the consumer. I shall briefly examine the validity and the accuracy of that statement.

Is it good for the taxpayer? In 1992—the year that the then Secretary of State made the statement to the House—the guarantee section of the common agricultural policy cost European taxpayers £24 billion. The anticipated cost of the same section in 1997 is some 40 billion ecu—or £31 billion. Between 1992 and 1997, the cost of the guarantee section of the common agricultural policy will increase by £7 billion. So much for it being good for the taxpayer. I cannot detect any sign—other hon. Members may be able to—that the remorseless increase in the budget will be mitigated effectively.

Many hon. Members have urged us not to be party political in the debate. However, I must put on record the fact that those massive increases in common agricultural policy expenditure were agreed, step by step, by the same Government who said in 1992 that the deal which they had fought for and achieved in Europe was good for the taxpayer. That point must be underlined.

The remorseless increase in expenditure cannot continue: this year it has increased by 10.7 per cent. over last year. I can think of many education authorities that would love to have a 10.7 per cent. increase in funding. How can the country justify that expenditure? Brussels has put up its hand for an expenditure increase of almost 11 per cent. this year while, at the same time, the Government turn around and tell the people of this country—including the researchers—that there will be funding cuts. That approach is not consistent, it is wasteful and it will not allow us to meet our objectives.

In discussing issues of cost and what is good for the taxpayer—who is also the consumer—we should note that in 1992 the Commission anticipated that the total cost of the reforms would be some 2 billion ecu over and above the 1992 budget. According to my calculations, that is about £1.3 billion. Those costs now total £7 billion. I accept that some of the costs may be attributed to enlargement, but we cannot argue away the massive increases in the cost of the CAP to which the Government have systematically agreed year after year.

Is the common agricultural policy good for the farmer? In opening the debate—or by way of intervention—the Minister of Agriculture said that farmers are better off today than they have been for many years. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East (Dr. Strang) responded by saying that the Minister's statement might have been credible if it had been made before 20 March, but that in the present circumstances it was an insult to producers.

Let us examine how the common agricultural policy has benefited the farmers. It is true that incomes have increased across the board. They vary between sectors; they always have. Is that increase due to some deliberate Government policy? Did Ministers sit down and consider ways in which farmers' incomes could increase within the common agricultural policy? The answer is no. Farmers' incomes have increased largely because of the devaluation that was forced upon the Government in Sept 1992. That was the most significant factor to affect farmers' incomes. If the Government wish to claim credit for the increase in

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farmers' incomes, they cannot shy away from the fact that destruction of their economic policy forced devaluation and increased farmers' incomes. The Government cannot have it both ways.

The other reason why farm incomes have gone up is that there has been an increase in world prices, especially in cereals.

Year on year, it is costing the CAP £1.3 billion to cover the cost of devaluation. It has faced that cost since 1992 and it continues now. Farmers know that incomes that have been increased as a result of a destruction of Government policy and because of devaluation, and that a policy that depends on contributions of that magnitude are no basis for the future that they dearly want to see secured. We should all agree with them. It is important that we recognise that.

World prices have increased to such an extent and the CAP is such a nonsense that—I am not sure whether this is widely known—the European Union is taxing cereal exports to meet world demand. How crazy can it get? We are putting taxes and levies on imports. Because of the CAP, when we have an opportunity to export, we put taxes on those exports because of the demands of the CAP. That is absolutely ludicrous.

It is not an exaggeration to say, therefore, that when we present that scenario to farmers—they know it better than any of us because they live with it every day—and we say, "This is the future", we insult their intelligence. They know that that basis is no way to determine the future of agriculture.

The third area is the consumer. I want to relate my comments on that to bovine spongiform encephalopathy. I run the risk of being accused of using hindsight and of apportioning blame. I want to avoid that if I can, but for the Government to suggest that their actions since the early 1980s have not contributed to the disastrous fall in consumer confidence defies logic and belief. Who deregulated the animal food processing industry?

Mr. Ian Bruce: Has the hon. Gentleman read the two papers that the hon. Member for Peckham (Ms Harman) waved at hon. Members because, if he has, he will know that that is a nonsense of a charge?

Mr. Stevenson: I did say that I stand to be criticised, but I hope that my comments—if the hon. Gentleman will listen to me a little longer before he makes his charges—will show that I have a real point to make here, without apportioning blame.

In relation to the Government, two important elements run all the way through the issues that arose in the 1980s. The first is—I repeat—that there was a deregulation of the industry, which resulted in concerns being expressed by scientists that those measures ran the risk of not effectively destroying the agents that could have contributed to the problem.

Mr. Alan W. Williams: The Southwood committee was set up by the Government in 1989 to consider the origins of BSE. It reported at length. I read that report at the time and it concluded that the 1980 deregulation and, in particular, the lowering of temperatures in the rendering process caused—

Mr. Ian Bruce: It was not deregulation.

Mr. Williams: It was deregulation. It allowed industry to maximise its profits and to choose its own temperature. That lower temperature caused scrapie to turn into BSE.

Mr. Stevenson: I am grateful for that intervention, with which I concur. Again, so that I am not misunderstood—I have touched the sensitivities of some Conservative Members—I am not seeking to apportion blame, but to string together a series of events that took place in the 1980s that lead to serious concerns about what the Government did and did not do.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: Just to nail this point once and for all, is my hon. Friend aware that page 13 of the Library paper on BSE, published today, says:

"The generally accepted explanation for the occurrence of BSE is that it followed a change of process in the rendering industry away from the use of chemical solvents, in a process which required a high temperature to drive off the chemicals, to another continuous process."

Mr. Stevenson: I am aware of that and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention, which has adequately answered that of the hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce).

Mr. Ian Bruce: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Stevenson: I will not give way again. I wish to make some progress. The point has been adequately answered.

Mr. William Ross: As was rightly pointed out by the hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice), there was a change in process from batch treatment to a continuous treatment. Do any other countries in Europe still use the batch treatment? Is that treatment still dealing with the problem not only of the BSE prion, but of other diseases such as salmonella?

Mr. Stevenson: I do not claim to be an expert on agricultural and rural affairs in the United Kingdom and therefore I cannot answer hon. Gentleman's question. I apologise for that, but my remarks were dealing with what happened in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Welsh: The hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) knows the answer.

Mr. Stevenson: He probably does and he will probably tell me later.

The second element that runs through what happened in the 1980s is a growing perception that the Government were never in control of the position, no matter what they did. I recognise that perception and I do not blame our European counterparts for having it. Between 1986 and 1988, there were two and a half years of inaction. Some people argue that the reason why the Government took no action in that time was that they hoped that the matter would go away, and they wanted to cover it up and protect the producer. I am not sure whether that is true, but it is a serious concern that many people have and it is not good enough for the Government to stand up time after time and say, "It was nothing to do with us."

On the issue of the 50 per cent. compensation, the Government were told at the time what would happen and it proved to be true. They were told that, some people, if faced with a marginal decision, would send their animals to market rather than face a 50 per cent. reduction in the value of those animals. It was as inevitable as night follows day, but, for 18 months, the Government took not a blind bit of notice. The Government then had to increase the compensation to 100 per cent., which they were told they would have to do in the first place. By then, whatever damage was to be done, had been done.

Throughout the 1980s, we were consistently told, "Do not worry. This cannot be transferred from one animal species to another." I do not know whether it can or not. I am not a scientist; I have read what scientific information is available. I know, however, that BSE has been identified in other animal species. The Government said, "Do not worry, it cannot be transferred from one animal species to another", but the fact is that it can. That affected consumer and public confidence.

Then the Government rightly said—I have not seen any conclusive scientific evidence to the contrary—that, given that the disease had occurred in other animal species, even though they thought that it could not and said that it could not, we should not worry because it could not affect humans. They said that time and again. I do not have to remind hon. Members that, not so many weeks ago, the same Government said that there was a new strain of CJD and the most likely cause of it was infected beef. The point that I am making, without apportioning blame, is that no time during that crucial decade of the 1980s, were the Government in control. They reacted to situations rather than being proactive.

When one puts all those factors together, is it any wonder that consumers do not believe the Government any more? If one thing needs to be done to restore consumer confidence it is for us to be frank with ourselves. The Government should be frank and not try, as the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Baker) did, to give the impression that the newspapers, the European Union and the Labour party are all to blame. It seems that everyone is to blame except the people who have been in power for the past 17 years. The Government might be able to fool themselves and, on the odd occasion, fool some Opposition Members, but they can no longer fool the consumer and the public—they have been rumbled.

I began by referring to the CAP and I shall end—

Mr. Ian Bruce: Hear, hear.

Mr. Stevenson: I hear the cry of "Hear, hear", which encourages me to continue a little longer, but I realise that I may fall foul of your good self, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

There are pressures for change in the CAP, and they are building. The GATT round, which has been an integral part of the reforms and will continue to be so, the budgetary pressures in the United States and enlargement all mean that the CAP will be forced into change. It would be a tragedy if that change were forced on the United Kingdom without us having a definite and proactive input into it.

One of the basic elements that will fuel that change is the recognition of a fundamental and self-evident point about the whole tragic mess of the BSE crisis. The days when consumers were prepared to put up with agriculture being able to produce as much food as it wanted, be heavily subsidised and run risks to maximise income—who can deny that risks were taken which may have contributed to the present crisis—are long gone. There will be a sea change in consumers' demands. One thing that will change, which is long overdue, is that people will insist that their food is produced in a wholesome manner that never again opens themselves and their families to the sort of dangers that have played such an important part in the destruction of consumer confidence over recent months.

8.53 pm

Mr. Quentin Davies (Stamford and Spalding): The news from Brussels tonight seems not discouraging so far as it goes. I hope, as I think that all my hon. Friends do, that on Monday, when the meeting of the standing veterinary committee resumes, the Government are able to secure agreement that the ban on tallow, semen and gelatine can be lifted. If that is achieved, it will be an encouraging step forward and a first dividend from the very considerable effort that my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister has put into finding a solution to the problem since March. He and his colleagues are to be congratulated on that.

All of us who have faith in the democratic process and the value of a democratic assembly such as this House believe that one of its great virtues is that, as a result of open debate, eventually—not necessarily immediately, but certainly over the longer haul—nonsense and illusions can be sifted out and the truth can prevail. Public debate on issues of national importance can thereby be better informed and clearer and policy-making more effective as a result.

Some people may say that that is a rather idealistic notion. I very much cling to it and therefore feel that it is important to take the opportunity of this debate to refute clearly the extraordinary degree of nonsense that has been abroad on this subject. I noticed that, in his interview in *Le Figaro* yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister asked what I thought was a very pertinent question when he inquired what the press had to do with the real world.

I would like to think that all my constituents in Lincolnshire are far too intelligent to take very seriously what they read in the tabloids and that they would not fall into the trap of supposing that they would get a balanced picture of the facts on any issue on which a tabloid is running a campaign. Nevertheless, some people might be sufficiently naive to believe what they read in the tabloids or even rely on the national dailies as their only source of information. Anybody who depended on the national press, especially the Murdoch press, the Black press or the Rothermere press, to give them anything like a clear picture of the context in which the BSE and beef crisis has been evolving would have been extraordinarily ill-served by what proudly used to call itself the fourth estate.

In my time in politics, I cannot recall another occasion on which there has been such a systematic attempt to subvert the truth and hide reality from people than the one that we have seen over the past few weeks.

Anyone who took seriously the newspapers to which I have referred and had no independent source of information on the situation would regard three propositions as entirely established and absolutely axiomatic. The first is that the

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BSE crisis and the crisis in the beef industry have been caused by the European Union or by our membership in the European Union. Secondly, they would believe as a matter of established fact that the European Union had taken the initiative in banning British beef. Thirdly, they would believe as a platitude that our membership of the European Union was a factor that made the crisis more onerous and more difficult to resolve.

Those three propositions are not only wide of the truth, they are, in every case, the exact reverse of the truth. That needs to be said loud and clear. As has already been said by several hon. Members in this debate, there is sadly no question at all but that this crisis is a British crisis. It is a British problem. I take not the slightest pleasure in recognising that fact, but it behoves us to have the courage and the honesty to face facts, uncomfortable or otherwise. Honesty and recognition of the truth, after all, are the first prerequisites in effective policy-making. Not only claims of justice and truthfulness but a pragmatic sense of how one most effectively manages a country requires us to remove from our minds any wishful thinking and to face fully the facts as they are.

The facts have been set out on many occasions. I should like to pay tribute to the paper prepared by the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology on this matter because, of all the many bits of paper I have read on this subject in the past few weeks, it is quite the clearest and most succinct. The facts are that we have had in this country more than 150,000 cases of BSE. The country with the next highest "score", if that is the right word, is Switzerland, with 205. Ireland has had 123; Portugal, 31; France, 13; and numbers that can be counted on one's two hands have been reported in Denmark, Germany and Italy. I believe that those cases are, sadly, attributable to imports from this country or to imports of contaminated feed from this country.

So it is a British problem, and we had better face that fact. Moreover, it is a problem that has affected the beef market across the European Union. We must therefore understand that others feel that we have rather gratuitously caused them very considerable difficulties. So perhaps—rather than insult and defiance—some understanding of the problems faced by other countries might be in order, as they have found that their beef sales have fallen although they have no significant level of BSE.

It is a British problem in more senses than those that I have mentioned. I do not believe that it is fair or useful to be wise after the event, although it is always very tempting to do so. Nevertheless, there are lessons that we should learn from this sad case, to which it is now right to draw attention.

Looking back, it was extraordinary that we decided in 1988 to ban the future use of animal offal in feed for cattle, but that we did not ban the existing stock of those feeds. After all, if the offal was dangerous, presumably the stock was dangerous and should not have been used. The fact is that that stock appears to have continued to be used for some time.

There was the problem that feeds containing offal designed for other animals—pigs and chickens—somehow continued to leak into feed for cattle. That also raises issues. We then found that there have been abuses of the new regulations in abattoirs and feed mills—I am sure not since March, but in previous years. So there are lessons to be drawn, and we should draw them.

I am not one of those who think, even in retrospect, that it would have been a good idea to have adopted the severe French and Irish policy of slaughtering an entire herd whenever an animal with symptoms of BSE was discovered. But perhaps one could have considered an intermediate policy of slaughtering the relevant age cohort in a herd in which BSE had appeared. That would have been rather more logical. I think that the age cohort would very likely have come from the same farm or market at the same time, and might therefore have been likely to have been fed on contaminated feed at some point. However that may be, there are bound to be lessons to be learnt from this situation, and we should not avoid the responsibility of learning them.

This is also a British problem in a rather more profound and structured sense. For many years I have said in public—certainly in Lincolnshire—that it is a matter of concern that the British beef industry, which was for centuries world famous for the roast beef of England or of Scotland, in recent generations or decades has become, to far too great a degree, a by-product of the dairy industry. In this country it is extremely difficult to find genuine pedigree beef—beef from a pure beef herd, whether the old-fashioned British breeds such as Angus or Hereford, or Charolais or Limousin. It is possible, but it is difficult.

Mr. Garnier: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way because I know that time is short and it is highly unlikely that I will be able to take part in the debate. I should just like to correct my hon. Friend, because if he visited Leicestershire, particularly the Welland valley in high Leicestershire in my constituency, he would find some of best beef fattening country in the land. There is plenty of good English beef to be found not too far from my hon. Friend's constituency, just across the border in my part of the world.

Mr. Davies: That is the tragedy because there are farmers who still specialise in producing the pedigree beef herds, which produce some extremely good beef. My hon. and learned Friend has just re-emphasised my point, however, because it is extraordinarily difficult for the consumer to find that beef. I am well aware that the beef buyer for the Savoy hotel group will know where to buy his beef. I am well aware that there are one or two specialised butchers who make a point of having access to specialised beef herds. It is also true, however, that for the ordinary consumer it is not possible to find such beef.

I recommend that my hon. and learned Friend should go to a butcher or supermarket in his constituency and ask the salesman, "What breed is that beef? What age is it?", let alone, "When was it slaughtered?". In many cases, he will not even get an answer to that question. Far too much meat in this country is sold by people who do not know what they are selling and bought by people who do not know what they are buying.

The butcher or the supermarket manager rings somebody up on a Monday morning and says, "Send me a tonne of beef", and the stuff arrives on the back of a refrigerated truck, it is red and it comes from some kind of bovine animal. Frankly, that is about all they know about that meat and all they expect their customers to know about it.

That is an unsatisfactory state of affairs because a market should have proper information channels. Customers should be sufficiently demanding, should know what they are buying and have an opportunity to choose between different qualities of the product. Above all, unless the producers get some credit when they can improve the quality of their products, so that when they specialise in a beef herd, they can be certain that they will get the premium price for it, which in turn means that people know what they are buying and will pay that price, the quality of the product will deteriorate. That, sadly, is our problem.

Mr. Welsh: On a point of information, the hon. Gentleman's comments about beef and dairy herds apply far more to England, because if he wants specialist beef herds he will find them in Scotland—30 per cent. of our industry is pure beef compared with 10 per cent. in England. If the customer wants to buy high quality beef, Aberdeen Angus is only one of many excellent Scottish beef breeds.

Mr. Davies: I am well aware of the virtues of Aberdeen Angus, but it is extremely difficult to find that pure Aberdeen Angus in this country. I am told that some British butchers find that it is unfashionable because the genuine article has a slightly fatty grain in it. The fact remains that if one buys beef in Britain, the chances are that, at best, one will get a cross-bred animal. It is a by-product of the dairy industry because to get cows to lactate, one has to get them pregnant. They therefore produce calves. Those are sold on to someone who fattens them up, and then often slaughters them much too young. That beef is then often sold without being hung properly. At several different stages, the way the market works guarantees that the quality will deteriorate.

The fact is that if people are unlucky, they will just get a piece of redundant dairy cow. In most outlets it will be difficult to distinguish between the breeds. That is important because of its implications for the quality of beef in this country, which has declined—there is no question about that. If one goes to America and one orders a steak, one gets a piece of pure beef animal, such as a Texas Longhorn. In France, one can buy guaranteed pure Charolais or Limousin. In fact, France operates a system of appellation contrôlée for meat, as it does for wine, and a butcher can go to gaol if he pretends that meat is a bit of Charolais when it is a bit of a dairy cow. If one goes to Latin America, one can eat the most delicious pure beef in the world, which has had nothing to do with the dairy industry.

Sadly, that is not the case in Britain. We have to face up to that fact, which, unfortunately, plays a role in the BSE problem because no one in his right mind would feed pure pedigree beef herds on high-protein compound feeds. In most cases, there is no question of such herds having been fed on offal-based feedstuffs. They will have been grazed or fed on cereals. If it had been possible to distinguish clearly in Britain between what I would call genuine beef and the by-products of the dairy industry, a large sector of the market—perhaps especially in Northern Ireland and Scotland—would have been protected ab initio from the blight that now affects the whole industry. There are lessons—and British lessons—to be learned. We should have the courage to face them.

The second general proposition that one would assume to be axiomatic from reading much of the national daily press is that the European Union took the initiative in banning British beef. If one asked people on the street how the problem arose, many would say that the EU aggressively banned British beef. Many people think that it was banned because the French or the Germans like being nasty to us. Once again, that is the exact reverse of the truth.

The European Union was not the first body to ban British beef; it was the last. We have heard that some 61 countries had banned it before the European Union, many of them many years ago, including countries with which we have always had good relations such as the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. They banned it five or six years ago when BSE first arose in Britain. If one thinks that it is sensible to retaliate by launching a trade war against the countries impudent enough to ban British beef, logically we should have had one with the United States for several years and we should now be having them with many other countries such as China and Russia.

Several of our European partners would have been tempted to follow those countries' lead in banning British beef some years ago—the Germans certainly wanted to—but they were prevented by European Union rules. Far from the EU having exacerbated or initiated the problem, the reverse is the case. For several years, we continued to be able to export freely to European Union countries. We would not have been able to do that had we not been a member of the EU.

The third proposition is that our membership of the European Union makes the problem more difficult to resolve or more onerous. Again, that is the exact reverse of the truth. It is a great advantage to be in the EU because it has a set procedure to address and resolve the problem. There are various protections in the treaties and, in particular, we can turn to the European Court of Justice if our partners do not seem to be acting in good faith. Those procedures have been launched and are in progress. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister said earlier, the Commission, the veterinary committee and so forth are being helpful. When those procedures reach a conclusion, the ban will automatically be lifted throughout the EU. That problem will then be resolved, but persuading the other 61 countries to lift the ban will take much longer. Who knows how easy that will be? The problem can be more easily resolved within the EU than it could conceivably have been outside it.

Finally, financial support will be available. We must be grateful for that at least. It will contribute towards the cost of the very necessary subsidies to farmers and to the industry. We must recognise the irony that although beef production and sales have fallen faster in other European countries than in Britain—and so the commercial damage to their producers may have been greater than in Britain—they will receive no subsidy because they have no slaughter programme because they do not have BSE. We will get subsidies at the expense of people who have been harder hit and despite the fact that they may feel that they are less responsible than we are for the origin of the crisis.

We have here a thicket of illusions and sheer lies, systematically purveyed across the country, which have made it extremely difficult for the British people to see the effects clearly and to plan ahead.

I do not want to sit down without making some positive suggestions as to how we go forward from here. First, we must restore consumer confidence. There is no point in

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simply lifting formal bans unless consumers will buy. We must persuade the consumer that BSE is out of the food chain.

I still have some problems with the idea of culling animals aged more than 30 months. Because the symptoms do not arise until some time after the age of 30 months, if one did that there would be a lower incidence of symptoms arising and established cases of BSE. But the proportion of animals in a herd which carry the BSE agent might not be reduced.

To do that, one needs to identify those animals that could have been fed contaminated feed, or, more practically, to identify those herds that could not have been fed such feed. If we could do that, I hope that we could make progress by exempting from the ban beef herds that have been reared organically or entirely grazed, perhaps on the basis of herds—or perhaps, as has been suggested this evening, we might be able to certify that animals in whole areas of the country were free of any disease. That would be a useful way forward.

Secondly, I urge on my hon. Friend—I have already done so in writing—that we introduce a proper certification system in Britain. That is badly needed. In retrospect, it is a pity that we did not have it before, but I hope we can introduce it as soon as possible. I believe the Government intend to do so in June, and I greatly welcome that.

Thirdly, I hope that some good will in the end come out of all this evil. I hope that in future we will have a better informed market and a better segmented market; that customers will be conscious of the need to distinguish between different types of beef and more conscious of the difference between beef that is genuinely raised as such and beef that is the by-product of the dairy industry; that they will once again demand that their butchers know what they are buying; that they will once again give some credit to those butchers who take the trouble to buy their animals on the hoof directly from farms or in market, slaughter them themselves and can tell them where they come from, what breed they were and when they were slaughtered; and that they will once again be prepared to give some premium to those farmers who are prepared to take the trouble to raise genuine British beef. If that were so, we may find that out of this nightmare we can re-establish the international reputation for the quality of British beef which has been so sadly eroded in recent times.

9.17 pm

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): As the House knows, I own a farm, although I have not done much farming for many years. At present, my total stock consists of four hens, five guinea fowl and three peacocks. The hens at least are laying, so we are getting something out of them, but probably not at very much profit.

This has been an unusual debate, totally unlike the debate that one expects on an occasion such as this. Only the hon. Member for South Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer) made a speech that would fit into the usual pattern on these annual occasions because he ranged over a large section of the farming community.

It was wise that at least one hon. Member did that and I would have liked to have followed him to point out that the general prospects for agriculture are not nearly as bright as some people have tried to paint them; that the agricultural work force has greatly diminished during the past 30 or 40 years and is still falling; that the average age of farmers is increasing which is not good; that there is now a low profit per animal per acre except for milk; and that the increase in income that we have seen, which was referred to by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson), owed much more to the exchange rate and to the fact that it arose from a low level of income anyway. Sadly, the hon. Gentleman did not draw attention to the benefits that accrued when our currency was allowed to float after we were forced out of the exchange rate mechanism. That opinion may not be shared by Opposition Members now, although I am still very much in favour of it. We also have a difficulty with family farms, which are the norm and will remain so. A real family farm must produce a sufficient net income to keep two generations of a family, and that is generally forgotten. I thought that it would be worth while to draw the House's attention to those matters.

Intensive farming is perceived to be cruel and unnatural, but it arose simply because of the demand to produce the maximum amount of foodstuffs possible in our temperate climate. Anyone who has seen 500 hens in a muddy field in December or January might question the cruelty of the cage or the intensive housing systems. I have seen and worked with both methods, and I have some idea of what I am talking about—unlike very many people who complain about these matters. The changes in farming that have occurred in my lifetime have led to much cheaper food than would otherwise have been the case. Problems will arise in that area if we extend the European Union into the eastern part of Europe, where 25 per cent. of the population are engaged in agriculture. These massive questions have not been touched upon today, although they have been mentioned in Committee, and I hope that the Minister for Agriculture will read the reports of the debates.

If we are to have a competitive and market-driven form of farming, we must realise that within the western world—particularly this country—we cannot have the high levels of hygiene that we demand. The production standards as called for by the green lobby cannot be maintained, and we cannot have all the safeguards that are demanded for our food. We are failing to take into account the fact that these things cost money. If we want those standards, there will be a much higher price at the farm gate than has hitherto been the case. This is the sort of debate that we all should be taking part in. Although we want a secure food supply, we must learn that it cannot come at little or no cost. It will cost more than has been the case for a long time. The question of higher costs is built into the environmental and conservation measures that are now demanded.

Having said that, I—like every other Member—am now forced to move on to BSE, which is the issue of the moment. Germany claimed half of the 50,000 tonnes of intervention meat for May, and other places did exactly the same thing. That led to an immediate and massive scaling back in the requests made by those countries. In Northern Ireland, we asked for a realistic figure and there was no scaling back. I hope that our modest and realistic attitude will be rewarded in the future.

With regard to the 30-month slaughter scheme, at 4 May in Northern Ireland some 40,000 cattle had been offered for the scheme. The telephone lines were jammed and people could not get through. We do not know how

many cattle are out there, but there are a lot, and there are others approaching the age of 30 months. We have a restrictive rendering capacity, with the maximum being some 1,800 a week. I understand that the number of culled cows is rising every week. There is a real difficulty.

We have an urgent need to slaughter a large number of cattle, not only because they are eating all the available food as the grass is not growing, but because they are providing a problem for the Treasury. The food does not disappear—it appears in extra weight, and every kilo that these animals put on must be paid for. The sooner the animals are slaughtered and put into cold storage, the better. It would be more economical to freeze them in a store than to let them run around, eating their heads off and putting on more weight.

I believe that the topping-up grants should continue to be paid until the surplus of steers, heifers and young bulls has been dealt with and equilibrium has been restored. The same applies to the cattle that have already been sold. Many people have had to clear out their stock because they had no food left to feed it.

I hope that the Minister will discuss the issue of young bulls this evening—it presents a tricky problem. They are not eligible for intervention or for the 30-month scheme, and those above the maximum carcase weight are also excluded. These are dangerous animals, as every farmer knows. One breeding bull is all very well, but who wants to deal with 100 of them at a time? I have worked with cattle all my life and I know that I would not want to. There is no commercial market for these cattle and they have to be removed from the food chain.

We have heard a great deal about how good Northern Ireland's system of identification is. It is indeed far in advance of any other system in Europe. The downside for farmers is that as soon as a beast appears in a terminal at a market, its history is flagged up and everyone knows precisely what contact with a BSE herd the animal may have had, whereupon the beast immediately becomes unsaleable. Hence the vital need for help.

There is also a great need to help the more than 200 BSE-flagged suckler pure beef herds in Northern Ireland; and something must be done for the BSE-flagged heifers.

This whole affair with all its ramifications has shown up one facet of farming, the beef industry, in a way that nothing else could have. All the nooks and crannies have been exposed and people have learned things about farming that they never knew before. For some time we have been urging the Government to use the systems already in place in Northern Ireland and Scotland and soon to be in place—I hope—in other regions to identify cattle that are free from BSE and to use them as a crowbar to prise open European and world markets. Once that is done, the special export refunds will come into play. They are most beneficial when it comes to exporting cattle. I hope in this respect that the Government will begin to move somewhat faster and further in Europe over the coming weeks.

In Northern Ireland, we have nine slaughtering facilities and two rendering plants, all centrally monitored by the Government. I suspect that they are more tightly controlled than similar establishments here, which are often under the control of local authorities. Ministers can make use of that fact, which shows that we are in a much stronger position than the other parts of the United Kingdom.

Last year, Northern Ireland exported 54,000 tonnes of beef, which amounted to 28 per cent. of the UK's total exports. Taking that much meat out of the British market would help tremendously efforts to remove the glut of beef.

Time is short this evening, so I will end with a brief word about transmission of the disease. We do not know enough, but we do know—this has not yet been mentioned—that ordinary mice, when their brains are injected with BSE, contract the disease or something mighty like it. Mice into which a human gene has been spliced appear to show much greater resistance. Unfortunately, the mice live only two years, so we do not know whether the infection would eventually develop. If there is increased resistance in such mice, it suggests that the species jump must be more difficult than the general public believe. I hope that much more experimentation will go into that.

I hope that the remarks that have been made, not only in the debate but in the Select Committee, will be heeded. We need to discover whether the source of the infection is sheep or cattle.

9.30 pm

Mr. Rhodri Morgan (Cardiff, West): I say at the start, like most hon. Members who have spoken, that this is the annual debate on the common agricultural policy, but today it has in general been about BSE. There is no way of avoiding that; it is the issue of the moment.

Most hon. Members have spoken at some time today to members of the National Farmers Union lobby from England and Wales—I am not sure whether it was also from Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Mr. Welsh *indicated assent.*

Mr. Morgan: It was a lobby of NFU members from throughout the United Kingdom, who came to the House to talk to us, not about the CAP at large, but about BSE. It is relevant to the subject of the debate, because BSE is poisoning our relationships with our fellow member states of the European Union in a way that nothing has done for many years, at least in the agricultural sector.

We welcome the progress, albeit microscopic, that was announced by the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in his point of order at approximately 6.56pm, concerning lifting the ban on semen, tallow and gelatine. We hope that that progress will bear fruit on Monday. If, as we hope, the ban is lifted, the farming industry will see some light at the end of the tunnel.

The debate is being held the day after the Government announced the £20 million advertising campaign to restore the feel-good factor, saying:

"Yes it hurt. Yes it worked."

That is a sick joke to most people who work in the beef or agriculture industry. They will wonder where the Government have been living for the past few years, and they will not accept that a great turnaround has occurred. I shall make no comments about other aspects of the economy, but people who work in the beef industry do not think that anything is working. They certainly do not think that the Government have effectively delivered a proper response to the BSE crisis.

The hon. Member for Stamford and Spalding (Mr. Davies), who is not in his seat at the moment, made an outstanding speech [illegible] objective and brutally frank as

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we all should be when we speak in the House of Commons. He described the origins and size of the problem, the responsibility of this country and the responsibilities of other countries to co-operate with us when they feel that objective scientific evidence justifies it.

The hon. Member for Stamford and Spalding rightly said that the United States of America was the first country to ban British beef, as long ago as 1989, and that it was many years before the European Union banned it. One would gain the impression from the public prints and some speeches by Conservative Members that the European Union was the only part of the world to have banned the import of British beef, whereas in fact it did so six or seven years after the USA.

The hon. Member for Stamford and Spalding rightly said that the geographical distribution of BSE shows that the highest incidence of BSE occurs in places where the beef industry is most closely tied up with the dairy industry. That is why there is a south-west to north-east decline in the incidence of BSE. In the south-west of England and south-west Wales, the incidence tends to be quite high, but as one moves northwards towards the specialist beef-growing areas of the north-east of Scotland and Northern Ireland the incidence is less because there is a more specialised beef industry.

That puzzled many of us, but the farmers gave us a reason today. According to them, the dairy industry is savagely competitive, and consequently the feed mills that serve it are savagely competitive as well. In their search for cheaper but higher-protein feeds they undoubtedly broke the rules and used inappropriate material, and that led to the present crisis. Specialist beef producers have probably not been affected, unless they have been unlucky enough to suffer through cross-breeding or the purchasing of animals from another region.

I believe that the highest incidence of BSE in England is in Devon, Cornwall and Somerset, and that the highest incidence in Wales is in Dyfed, in the south-west corner, because rainfall and grass growth is greatest there, and because that is where the specialist dairy herds and beef herds are—the classic beef animal being a Hereford-Friesian cross that has come in from the dairy industry, and whose mother and grandmother are more likely to have consumed the high-protein bonemeal pellets that were used in an attempt to drive up the protein content of milk.

Mr. Beggs: There is no evidence that the problem can be transferred from mother to calf. The hon. Gentleman is right, however, to suggest that more compound feedstuffs will have been used to finish cross-bred cattle.

Mr. Morgan: I was not referring to the possibility of maternal transmission. That is an entirely different issue, which is still the subject of experimentation at Weybridge. I hope that the Minister, or other Ministers tomorrow, will be able to tell us more about that experiment; I asked about it today, but my questions were not answered. The issue is dear to my heart. I hope that the experiment will be completed, and that Ministers will tell us the results when they have them—in the summer or autumn, I believe.

The problems of south-west Wales have been mentioned, and I want to concentrate on Wales. We have already heard several speeches about Welsh agriculture, but I am sure that many of the points that I shall make have parallels in other parts of the United Kingdom. A big question is how well the Government have handled their new policy on the slaughter of cattle and their removal from the human food chain. The farmers told us today that they had concluded that the Government did not have a clue what they were doing. They go over to Europe and tell people there that they are introducing a scheme, but weeks later the scheme has not been introduced; yet they expect Europe to take it on trust that such and such a slaughter policy is being implemented and that cattle are already being removed from the food chain. We know, because our farmers are telling us, that that has not happened. Weeks later, a huge backlog has built up on farms of animals that have not yet been processed through a scheme that the Government are trying to persuade Europe that they have introduced.

If our farmers do not trust the Government's ability to implement a scheme in the time scale that they promised, consumers in Germany, France and other European Union countries cannot be expected to have faith in their capacity to implement it. We know that it is not working in this country.

Today we were given a letter from the Minister of State—the only agriculture Minister who is not in the Chamber now—listing the slaughterhouses that would participate in the scheme to remove cattle aged over 30 months from the food chain. It is difficult for us to have much faith in the information, at least as regards Wales. Three abattoirs in Wales are listed, but the National Farmers Union told us today that one is not participating. Geographically, the abattoirs are quite well distributed, but the one that apparently will not participate is located in the area which contains most of the cows that will need to be processed. One is in Gaerwen in Anglesey, which is a fairly important area, and one in Abergavenny in Gwent, near the English border; that, too, is a fairly important area.

The most important area, where almost 70 per cent. of the cows are stacked up on the farms and no one knows what to do with them, is Dyfed in south-west Wales. That area has the highest concentration of BSE outbreaks; we need to take urgent action. We have been told that Oriel Jones in Llanybydder, which has been mentioned, is not participating in the scheme. How much credence is the House to give to the letter from the Minister of State? If we cannot place our trust in it because the slaughterhouse that should be serving 70 per cent. of the cattle is not participating, although it is listed, what are our colleagues in the Council of Ministers supposed to make of it when they look for suitable reassurances? That below-par performance from the Government is consistent with the pattern of performance that we have seen since the beginning of the saga.

Mr. Douglas Hogg: While it is perfectly fair to criticise the Government, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will take into account the possible impact on Europe of inaccurate remarks. As I said earlier, today more than 4,000 cattle have been slaughtered. I hope that we shall soon be slaughtering 18,000 or so a week in England and Wales. It is important not to misunderstand those facts.

Mr. Morgan: I was reporting what the NFU in Wales had told me and other Welsh Members of Parliament today. We were told that the three slaughterhouses in

Wales—it appears to be only two—had slaughtered a cumulative total of 225 cattle. There are many cattle in Wales; there are 70,000 in the backlog—55,000 of them, we understand, in Dyfed, where there is no participating slaughterhouse. I am therefore not exaggerating the likelihood of there being serious problems; I am simply giving the figures that were provided to us by farmers' representatives, based on their knowledge and the information that they had been given by the slaughterhouses.

I hope that the Minister will refer to the fact that we have no rendering capacity in Wales; we understand from the NFU that there is no such capacity and there is only one incinerator. The incinerator in Haverfordwest in south-west Wales cannot be served by a local slaughterhouse. There are logistical problems in getting cattle to two slaughterhouses in south-east Wales and north-west Wales, then into England for rendering, then back down to Haverfordwest in the extreme south-westerly corner of Wales for incineration. That process will pose big problems for the country roads of Wales throughout the summer. I hope that the Minister can give us some reassurances on that point.

There has been a breakdown of trust in general between the farming industry and the Government. There is also a breakdown of trust between the farmers and the feed mills. The farmers believe that the feed mills poisoned their cattle and caused BSE when the changeover from batch production to continuous feed occurred. At that time, much material was being processed at below the proper temperature and no one did anything about it; it was not regulated or stopped. The farmers believe that it is essential to restore a measure of regulation into the feed mill industry. Until six weeks ago—March 31—it was still possible for infected feed to be introduced from chicken feed, which was still allowed to contain the specified bovine offal. The offal in chicken feed and pig feed was coming—via the same lorries and feed mills—into the food being fed to dairy cattle. That problem has now been solved, but it should have been solved six or seven years earlier.

Why has it taken the Government so long to move towards using the available cold storage that is not in use? What proposals are there to reactivate the redundant slaughterhouses that have been closed in the rationalisation process and thus increase the slaughtering capacity? Are we still in the hands of the rendering industry? Is it setting the agenda for the Government and causing the agriculture industry and the other by-product industries to suffer until it gets its act together?

Will the Government tell us what is to happen about traceability? Will there be a scheme similar to the one in Northern Ireland so that we know exactly when beef animals were slaughtered, what farm and herd they came from and their cross or whatever else needs to be known? Using the Northern Ireland standard of traceability would be a good starting point and would help to restore confidence to the British consumer and to our partners in the European Community. People would know that the Government were not merely talking about solving the problem but were implementing measures—not just planning them—so that when the Minister goes to Brussels and says, "This is what we intend to do next week," it actually happens at that time.

There has been a series of delays, prevarications and dithering. A breakdown in confidence is apparent throughout agriculture over the Government's handling of the issue. That is why we shall seek to divide the House tomorrow on the issue of how badly the Government have handled the BSE crisis.

9.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Gwilym Jones): The debate has been good in some parts and not so good in others. I am glad to have this opportunity to speak in a debate that was opened so excellently by my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. In the circumstances, his was a measured speech. I can speak from close experience of his skill and ability and his energy, enthusiasm and emotion. He has fought tenaciously and diplomatically for our best interests in Europe. I know that, because I was alongside him in Luxembourg at the invitation of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales.

There was not the slightest doubt that the interests of Wales were fully represented by the Minister, that it improved our representation and presentation and gave us the opportunity for immediate discussions on matters affecting all the countries of the United Kingdom. Not least, we were able to increase our activities at the margins in our contacts with member states. My noble Friend Baroness Denton of Wakefield represented Northern Ireland's interests, and my noble Friend Lord Lindsay had Scotland's interests to the fore. The fact that we have not completely succeeded is not failure. Progress is being made in the context of responses by the Commission and member states, and is a demonstration of the sheer magnitude of the problem of this unjustified ban.

If my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister of Agriculture's opening speech was excellent, we were all greatly disappointed by the hon. Member for Edinburgh, East (Dr. Strang), whose speech might have been more typical of a Scottish Grand Committee, because it seemed to be a north-of-the-border long lament. He made much of this not being the sort of debate that he wanted, and that there was something wrong with the motion. As the hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members know, today is not the only opportunity we have had to debate this matter. The hon. Gentleman could have had a debate on it during an Opposition day if he was so impatient.

If the issue is so important to the hon. Member for Edinburgh, East where was his real contribution? I listened carefully for any positive remarks. He reiterated what he has said at other times and on which there is wide agreement—that it is important to pursue the issue of traceability and the quality assurance scheme. He rightly spoke about what has been done in Northern Ireland but, essentially, it was the typical, negative contribution that we hear so often from the Opposition, especially from their Front Bench. I noticed that the hon. Member for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan), who wound up for the Opposition, sought to outdo only his negative contribution.

Mr. Dalyell: My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East asked specific questions about science, and I asked the same sorts of serious questions. What are the Government doing about the prion problem and the basic science of this issue? That is a serious and straightforward question.

Mr. Jones: I shall try to answer the questions that hon. Members have asked. I know that my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the hon. Member for Tiverton (Mrs. Browning), wants to address several issues tomorrow.

I like to think that the hon. Member for Edinburgh, East is essentially a nice man. I know that he is aware of the Labour party's problem of being irresponsible on this issue and unfit to govern in general. I prefer to think that he is a nice man, and that he has the awful spectre of the hon. Member for Peckham (Ms Harman) hanging over him—she has done so much to create chaos on this subject.

However, the hon. Member for Peckham is not the only hon. Member to have created chaos in this regard. If hon. Members doubt that, I refer them to what the hon. Member for Carmarthen (Mr. Williams) said this afternoon. The hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) made a necessary intervention on the hon. Gentleman and reminded him to be more temperate in his language, as it was being recorded in *Hansard*.

I hoped that, when the hon. Member for Carmarthen spoke about the multiplier effect, he would be as conscious as I am of the situation in west Wales and what has happened there as a result of the Sea Empress disaster. Indeed, I imagined that he would be the type of person who would want to put the sticker that I have in my hand on the back of his car. It states, "I'm still eating British beef." I obtained the stickers in west Wales last week from the Pembrokeshire Women's Farmers Union. They are now being displayed on my official car and on my private car. I hope that all hon. Members will take the opportunity to hit home that message.

The hon. Member for Carmarthen talked about the Government going to Europe with contrition and remorse. It was then that I realised that he was being unrealistic. He said that the Government should do that if they were serious about eradicating BSE—in fact, it would be a disservice to the farming community and to Britain in general. My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Mr. Baker) was being sarcastic when he described the hon. Gentleman as a distinguished scientist. When the hon. Gentleman told the House about the number of farmers in his constituency, I thought that his remarks would benefit the Conservative candidate there. He brought home the way in which the Labour party is writing off the rural vote in Wales—and the rural vote elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Tyler: Could the Minister spend a few minutes answering the real questions asked by a number of Conservative and Opposition Members instead of indulging in this ridiculous knock-about stuff? I have received a message from an auctioneer who covers Cornwall who said that, this afternoon, he was told by St. Merryn Meat, the local abattoir, that instead of being able to take the cattle it was intending to take, it has had its allocation cut by 300 by the intervention board and the explanation it has been given is that an abattoir is going on-line in Wales. If this is not evidence of yet more confusion today—which is what hon. Members on both sides of the House have been putting to Ministers—what is it?

Mr. Jones: If the hon. Gentleman had not spoken at such length, I would have been able to answer more of the questions asked by hon. Members.

The hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) was concerned about the labelling of feed. I confirm that the United Kingdom agricultural supplier trade association has said that major feed compounders will switch to full ingredient listing at the earliest opportunity. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will welcome this initiative, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce).

I shall now refer to the test for BSE. I am advised that Dr. Narang has not published details of his test, nor has he shown its validation by publishing it in a scientific journal. He has not given us any details of the test. However, we are in discussion about providing him with samples so that he can provide an independent demonstration of whether his test works.

The hon. Member for Carmarthen also talked about the deregulation of rendering. The Government did not relax regulations on rendering meat and bonemeal for feed—the decision was taken by the renderers when the consequences of what appeared to be a technical change could not have been appreciated.

Mr. Welsh: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Jones: The hon. Gentleman has not been present during most of the debate. However, I shall give way.

Mr. Welsh: Is there a test for contaminated foodstuffs? Will the brains of slaughtered cattle be analysed to establish hard evidence of the pathological nature of the disease so that it is a basis for policy and for customer confidence?

Mr. Jones: As I said earlier, the matter is of particular interest to my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton, who wants to deal with the Weybridge experiment—as it was referred to by the hon. Member for Cardiff, West. As there are only six minutes remaining to me, I must make some progress.

Sir Michael Spicer: The important question of vertical transmission has been raised once or twice during the debate. I understand that important work is going on at Weybridge, but there is other important work as well. It is becoming increasingly difficult to get hold of herd book data—genealogical data—held by the Government. Will my hon. Friend have a word with our hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton (Mrs. Browning) to find out whether there is a problem and whether research in that difficult area is being impeded by officials withholding information? My hon. Friend may not wish to answer the question now, but perhaps our hon. Friend will respond tomorrow.

Mr. Jones: I have been in conversation with my hon. Friend during the day, and she has told me that the work at Weybridge has been accelerated. She has also heard my hon. Friend's comments.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh, East apologised that he could not stay to hear all of my speech. I thank him for agreeing with my right hon. and learned Friend that no contaminated feed is reaching cattle and that compliance is now very good. The hon. Gentleman knows as well as anyone that it is important that the situation is not undermined by the sorts of irresponsible comments that some of his colleagues make occasionally. It is

important for confidence here and in Europe—a point emphasised by my hon. Friend the Member for Stamford and Spalding (Mr. Davies), who also apologised for his inability to remain to hear the winding-up speeches.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh, East said that he shared the Government's commitment to lifting the ban on British beef and beef products. He asked about the prior options review of research establishments. It is perfectly proper that Government-owned scientific laboratories should be reviewed from time to time. No decisions have yet been taken regarding the animal science establishments that deal with BSE and CJD, and the reviews of those laboratories are not due to be completed until July.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) brought some life into his exchanges with my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir J. Spicer) when he told us that he was red-blooded today. He admitted that he had eaten beef—I am delighted to hear it—but I can only imagine that it must have been the rarest of fillet steaks to put red blood into his veins when it comes to matters European. I am glad that he also endorsed the step-by-step approach to lifting the ban.

The hon. Gentleman inquired about the selective cull policy. It has been put to the Commission and we have made it clear that we took that decision in the context of discussions about lifting the ban. As my right hon. and learned Friend said, we have released a consultation document about a mature beef scheme. The consultation period ends on Friday and, naturally, we shall also discuss our proposals with the Commission.

I was very impressed by the concerted action taken by hon. Members who represent Dorset constituencies. There were strong representations from my hon. Friends the Members for West Dorset, for North Dorset and for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce). I understand the indignation expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset regarding the hon. Member for Peckham. He was correct to remind us of the actions of the last Labour Government in discouraging milk production.

Mr. Morgan: I have a question about the slaughterhouses. Does the Minister think it wise that designated slaughterhouses should deal, on different days, with special cattle under this scheme and with their normal trade? He knows that the supermarkets object strongly to that practice and that they are leaning on the slaughterhouses not to operate on that basis. Does the Minister believe that that is a sensible way forward?

Mr. Jones: I shall deal with that point and with the other issue raised by the hon. Member for Caernarfon. There are presently 96 abattoirs and 213 markets. The scheme began on 3 May, but, because of the constraints of rendering, we had to restrict it initially to 40 abattoirs. The limitations of rendering capacity pose a logistical challenge in administering the 30-month scheme. However, we do not believe that the arrangements are adequate in certain parts of the country.

I am particularly concerned about the situation in west Wales, and we are seeking urgent improvements to the arrangements in that respect. I understand that the abattoir at Gaerwen, Anglesey will begin culling animals from next Monday. There is also provision at Abergavenny and we are served by Shrewsbury.

The hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Caernarfon referred to reports that retailers are refusing to buy meat from abattoirs that are operating the 30-month scheme. I am aware of those reports. The daily meetings held by my hon. Friend the Minister of State are designed to deal precisely with such concerns. It is important to remember that we introduced the 30-month scheme in response to a request from retailers. We must now make it work. The scheme's rules, with the Meat Hygiene Service's strict controls, are more than adequate to ensure that only meat from animals under 30 months old reaches the consumer. If the reports are true, I hope that retailers will think again on the issue.

Finally, many hon. Members have said that we should retaliate against other member states if the export ban is not lifted. The Government's objective is to lift that unjustified ban on cattle, beef and beef products in the single market and third countries. We are working hard towards that end and some progress is being made. Premature retaliation is much more likely to hinder—

It being Ten o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

University Funding (Yorkshire)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Knapman.]*

10 pm

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): I tabled a motion for the Adjournment to draw the House's attention to higher education, especially to the universities in Yorkshire and Humberside because, like many Members of Parliament, I have had an increasingly interesting dialogue with members of the university community throughout the region I represent, especially with those at my local university of Huddersfield. I have had discussions with not only the vice-chancellors, but staff, the Association of University Teachers and all the unions whose members work on university campuses in the nine universities in Yorkshire and Humberside. Increasingly, they drew my attention to something that I in part already knew: the dire position that universities find themselves in.

To put that in context, our university system is one of the most successful aspects of our national life. It has been enormously successful historically, and, compared with our main international competitors, our higher education provision is very successful, but society has dramatically changed over a short period of years. To show that, I need say only that, just before the last war, only about 1 per cent. of people went into higher education; in the 1960s, when I was a student at the London School of Economics, the figure was just over 3 per cent.; and today it is 30 per cent. There has been a dramatic change in higher education in a short period.

Most of that boost of change has come in the past 25 years. I am not making this a strongly party political point, but fast growth has occurred since 1979, in the period of this Government. It would be silly to deny that that expansion has taken place, but it would take place in any society, and under any Government who were faced with the challenges of global competition. Increasingly, this country has had to learn that becoming globally competitive and creating wealth successfully is achieved by the pursuit of knowledge and by turning out highly skilled, highly educated, highly trained people, who can turn their hands to the most innovative processes we know.

There has been a catastrophic decline in the demand for less skilled and unskilled people. As a small boy, I would cycle past a factory, and it would have a sign saying, "Hands wanted", as though brains need not apply. We do not see such signs at a factory gate today.

There is an emphasis on knowledge and higher education. Our university system is the keystone of a wealth-creating society that provides the highly qualified personnel who make us a competitive nation. Our universities have responded magnificently to the need for a highly educated population, the rapid expansion of students and a very fast changing university world.

There are more than 100 universities in the country, and, as I said, nine in the region of Yorkshire and Humberside. Universities dominate whole communities as they never have before. In the old days, there was one major employer in most towns and cities. These days, with the emphasis on small and medium enterprises, the main employer in most towns and cities—and in my constituency—is the university, with its enormous complex of buildings in the centre of the town. It is the largest source of wealth in the town, brings more money and jobs into the town, and is certainly the focus of highly qualified individuals. In Yorkshire and Humberside, one in seven professionals work in universities. That is a large number, which has an important effect on our economic, industrial and cultural life.

There are more than 100 universities, and they are enormously important to our well-being and the future of our towns, cities and regions. They are critical not only in the traditional way of providing good education, teaching, tuition and research, but increasingly in the way in which they have responded to the challenge of a proactive relationship with the local community in every sense, and have aided urban, cultural and certainly industrial regeneration. Where that relationship works well—whether in Cambridge, Warwick, Huddersfield, Leeds or Sheffield—it has produced new ideas, innovation, new jobs, new companies, and guaranteed a future for our constituents.

Anyone who has been part, as I have, of a group looking at what our country will be doing for a living in 20 or 25 years' time—in the year 2020, along the lines of the Hamish McCrea book of that name—knows that the university will become not less important or have the same importance, but will grow exponentially in significance. The future well-being of our constituents depends on that.

I said that I wanted to concentrate on universities in Yorkshire and Humberside, because there are problems for our universities. Up to now, I have told a rather good story of expansion, growth, more people undergoing higher education, partnership and the university's dominating role. The background has been a determined and increasing squeeze on resources flowing into the university sector over the past 10 years.

There is no doubt that, in that time, there has been an enormous increase in students but a very small increase in staff. The resources devoted to each student has been squeezed. I would be the last to say that there was no room for economy, and any Government would have expected economies in higher education institutions that take so much of the national cake and national wealth.

On any criteria one can mention—productivity, effort, use of available resources—the universities have performed better and more imaginatively. When I visit them, time and again I see what they have done to maintain standards and quality, not only of the students but of research and of everything else they do, at the same time as increasing the number of students. That can go on for too long.

There has been an increasing feeling in the university community that there can be no further cuts or squeezes on the resources allocated to students and staff. That is a fact. The salaries of university personnel have recently been worse than those for any other profession, even for architects.

I should have declared an interest at the outset because I am still a member of the Association of University Teachers and was a university teacher, "when"—as I sometimes tell some of my constituents, who smile wryly—"I worked for a living." I sometimes think of what has happened to university salaries since I left teaching in 1979. If one extrapolates the salary I was on then, and

had salaries stayed at that level, university teachers would today be doing very well. The fact is that they have done very much worse.

We can go only so far before we stop getting the right quality of people coming to university, staying on into postgraduate research and then entering the teaching profession. That is the truth, and it is very worrying when one speaks to any vice-chancellor in the land about recruiting and retaining good quality graduates and entrants to the profession. The problem is growing.

The backdrop to the problem is the most recent Budget, because it represented a cut too far. The cuts announced by the Chancellor amazed everyone. I was in the Chamber for it, but I did not realise quite how deep the cuts were. Their depth became apparent in the few days after the Budget.

To do justice to the Chancellor, I do not think that he knew quite what he was doing. I have known him for a long time, and I know that he has a very positive attitude to higher education and is very interested in the university sector. I do not believe that he would consciously have done what he did in the Budget last November, but that he misunderstood what he was doing because of the way in which the facts were presented to him by civil servants and by people in the Treasury. I do not think that he would otherwise have made those cuts.

I should be grateful if, in his reply, the Minister of State will tell us whether he understood how punishing those cuts would be when the Budget was debated, whether he wanted that level of cuts to be made, or whether he fought his corner. Did he know what would happen with, for example, a 30 per cent. cut in capital spending?

There has been not only a new £657 million cut in universities' budget, but a cut of 30 per cent. in capital spending. The Chancellor suggested that that could be made up with funds from the private finance initiative. The fact is that 70 per cent. of that capital spending is used for building maintenance and minor extensions to buildings, and to buy new equipment and new technology. That expenditure is the very stuff that keeps a university running, and it is not the type of expenditure that is appropriately funded by the PFI.

Our universities are very positive about using the PFI. They have long used private finance in a range of building programmes. But the fact is that every vice-chancellor I have spoken to in Yorkshire, Leeds, Bradford, Huddersfield, the Leeds metropolitan area, and—last night in the House—Hull has said that it is not an appropriate way in which to use the PFI. A catastrophe is about to happen in higher education in our country, and that is not an exaggeration.

We have reached the point where teachers can no longer teach and researchers can no longer undertake research, and put their hands on their hearts and say, "We are maintaining the traditional high-quality education of the British university system." One cannot do that without the necessary tools. One cannot even respond to requests from the Chancellor and his colleagues to use modern technology in teaching, and thus reduce the cost of teaching, because one is prohibited from buying the new technology that would deliver that modern teaching.

Overseas students provide 10 per cent. of the income of British universities. They represent an important part of every university budget—for example, they provide £6 million for Bradford university. If that money was lost, any of our universities would be in great trouble, and the Chancellor and the Department for Education and Employment would be deeply disturbed. The provision of higher education is subject to global competition, and those making that choice are knowledgeable. Once there is a feeling that our standards are not being maintained, those countries that send so many students here will quickly switch their choice.

I have spoken to university personnel who go around the world doing the marvellous job of selling our courses. They tell me that our tough competitors from Australia, Canada and America are telling people not to send their students to Britain because the quality of education is not as good as it used to be. I am emphatic that that quality has been maintained, but I do not believe that it will be possible to guarantee that as a result of the latest swathe of cuts.

That is why it is so important to ask the Minister to use his influence to reverse the cuts announced in the November budget. He should restore the funding dedicated to capital spending and declare that there will not be another cut next year, followed by another the year after that.

Those cuts have been announced against the backdrop of a freeze on long-term planning for higher education, because Sir Ron Dearing is not due to report until after the next election. I do not agree with my party's philosophy, because I do not believe that we can fight the general election with a significant element of our economy in cold storage. Everyone is saying that we should wait to hear what Dearing says. I think it is healthy for those in a democracy to say vigorously, Dearing or not, that we have to have an expanding, healthy and wealth-creating higher education sector. I must demur from party policy on that.

I should like to conclude by citing a few examples of what the cuts mean to the universities of Yorkshire and Humberside. The higher education institutions of Yorkshire have lost £15.2 million in real terms in their Higher Education Funding Council income for 1996-97; Bradford university has been the hardest hit with a 5.8 per cent. cut; and Leeds faces the largest cash cut of £2.91 million.

According to the economic multiplier used in the work of Professor Iain McNicol, who has calculated the impact of cuts on Scottish higher education, the combined effect of the cuts will be a loss of £27.35 million in economic output, and 749 jobs from the Yorkshire and Humberside economy. That reveals how important and disastrous those cuts will be to our local economy.

It is not only the economies of Yorkshire and Humberside that will be dramatically affected by the cuts but that of whole country. We will kill the goose that lays the golden eggs. That is a nice old cliché, but we need greater investment in the university sector to boost new activities such as partnerships with the private sector and to help turn out more highly qualified undergraduates and postgraduates. That is where we will get our professionals, innovators and entrepreneurs. If we do not, we can give up against the competition, because our competitors around the world are investing vigorously in higher education.

The Minister and I both know that there are some hard choices to be made in higher education. Comparisons with Europe show that higher education does not do badly in its share of the cake, but we get the balance wrong. I would be the first to admit that the balance in Britain means that students get too much of the cake and

[Mr. Barry Sheerman]

institutions too little. Whichever party is in government after the next general election will have some hard choices to make about how to meet that challenge.

I suspect that it is inevitable, as night follows day, that we will adopt some sort of income-related loan scheme. When students have finished their education, are in employment and have reached a reasonable level of income, they will start to pay back what their country has invested in them.

I have tried to be honest about the challenges we must face, and I hope that the Minister will respond in an equally positive way and say that he will work with the vice-chancellors and university staff to pressure the Chancellor to draw back from the cuts that have been set in hand before it is too late.

10.21 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Education and Employment (Mr. Eric Forth): I congratulate the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) on obtaining this debate on what we would readily agree is a most important subject. I welcome much of what he said. He speaks with knowledge and experience of the sector, as was clearly shown by his remarks.

I join the hon. Gentleman in welcoming and acknowledging the success of the higher education sector in several respects in recent years. He referred to the domestic and international success of our universities, which are widely known and understood. We are somewhat in awe of the way in which the higher education sector has responded to the challenge of the huge expansion in the number of students, from about 3 per cent. of the relevant cohort in the 1960s to some 30 per cent. now. He was kind enough to acknowledge that higher education expenditure per pupil is as high in Britain as it is in most European countries.

I was slightly intrigued when the hon. Gentleman expressed his preference for an income-related loan scheme, because we already have one—the student loan scheme. To use an over-used and misunderstood expression, it is an income-contingent scheme in the important sense that our graduates do not start to repay the money they have borrowed until their incomes reach 85 per cent. of the average, which is in line with the much-vaunted Australian scheme. The repayment period is not much different from that in Australia. I mention that to illustrate that we are not much out of line with international experience.

I do not want to be tempted too far down the route that the hon. Gentleman boldly took when he hinted that he wanted elements of tuition fees to be paid by students as well. That is a debate still to come, and one which will rightly be led by the Dearing committee of inquiry.

I can understand the hon. Gentleman's frustration about that, but the truth is that the Government set up the committee of inquiry with the Opposition's full support. We have not had a proper, systematic, impartial review of higher education and its role in society for a generation now, since Robbins. There is a consensus that that is the right thing to do.

Where I begin to part company slightly with the hon. Gentleman is when he suggests that somehow higher education is the sole custodian, and should be the sole deliverer, of our requirement as a competitive trading economy to develop our skills and knowledge. That was the implication of what he said.

Of course higher education has a key, crucial and central role in that, but not an exclusive one. We must look increasingly to further education, to the development of technical skills, to modern apprenticeships, and to the range of different qualifications that we will increasingly have to offer not just our young people but people of all ages in the lifelong learning context.

Although universities will obviously have a key and important role to play in that, it will not be to the exclusion of the other important elements in the education process—our schools, sixth forms, and further education colleges—which do such a marvellous job and which will increasingly be asked to dovetail with what higher education is doing.

Sir Irvine Patnick (Sheffield, Hallam): As my hon. Friend is more than aware, it was after a meeting with the vice-chancellor of the university of Sheffield when I heard of his concerns that I facilitated a meeting with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, at which my hon. Friend was present. Have any further meetings taken place on that, and is anything being done to allay the fears that the vice-chancellor expressed at that meeting?

Mr. Forth: I thank my hon. Friend for arranging and facilitating that meeting, which was important, and which took place at a key time in the period following the Budget changes to which the hon. Member for Huddersfield referred.

I can assure my hon. Friend that there are on-going discussions with the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals—so ably led by the vice-chancellor my hon. Friend brought to see my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State—in order to cover the points that the hon. Gentleman made about the concerns that I well understand in higher education, following the somewhat dramatic changes in the Budget last November; in order to identify the true impact of those changes and, in particular, to what extent the private finance initiative can effectively replace the reductions in taxpayer funded capital expenditure; and to identify them sector by sector, institution by institution, and often, where relevant, faculty by faculty.

The hon. Gentleman was right to point out that we cannot expect the PFI in a uniform sense to step in and deal with every contingency in the same sort of way. There will be a real difference in the extent to which the PFI can effectively replace taxpayer funding, particularly on the capital side.

Mr. Richard Caborn (Sheffield, Central): When that exercise has been carried out, if the cuts that have been explained by the vice-chancellors are as draconian as they say, will the Chancellor revisit the whole question of the cuts that were announced in the 1995 Budget?

Mr. Forth: I shall not pre-empt or try to guess the outcome of the discussions and the investigations. I am

not sure whether Opposition Members are making a spending commitment and saying in terms that, were there to be a Labour Government, that Government would fully restore the level of taxpayer funding that existed before. It is a fair question. There is no point in creating a great fuss about cuts or reductions without saying what one would do about it.

We are now looking, with the CVCP and the institutions, at the extent to which the PFI can step into the breach and make good the changes that have been made. That is bound to vary enormously from one institution to another. But it is incumbent on Opposition Members—not tonight, but at some time in the future—to say what they think should or could be done in the context of the constraints laid upon them by their hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown).

Mr. Sheerman: But is not the real problem the fact that, when one caps university entrants and says, "No more students," one is dealing with a non-dynamic economy in the university sector, and that makes it so much more difficult to manage the cut made in November?

Mr. Forth: When the hon. Gentleman comes on to the number of students, he is opening up all the matters at which the Dearing committee will have to look in considering the purpose, shape, size and structure of the higher education sector. Inevitably, that will bring in the appropriate size of the cohort, the proportion of the cohort, that goes into higher education and how that is funded.

I share the hon. Gentleman's view that ways will have to be found if it is in the end concluded that many more people have to go into higher education to fund that. The Government of the day will have to face that squarely. I am convinced that they will be guided by the Dearing committee in what they do, and there is no point in us today trying to imagine what that committee will conclude.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at half-past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 16 May 1996

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

BODMIN MOOR COMMONS BILL *[Lords] (By Order)*

Order for Second reading read.

To be read a Second Time upon Tuesday 21 May at Seven o'clock.

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

Trade Balance

1. **Mr. Dykes:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on developments in the United Kingdom balance of trade and payments. [28489]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Mrs. Angela Knight): In the past two years, United Kingdom export volumes have grown by more than 15 per cent. and current account deficits have been the smallest for eight years.

Mr. Dykes: The Treasury and the Department of Trade and Industry often receive much criticism on economic performance, but may I offer congratulations on the build-up of exports? They increased, I believe, by 7.5 per cent. last year and by 19 per cent. the previous year. We are now Europe's largest exporters of computers, microchips and television sets, and we export more per head than, for example, Japan and the United States. Does my hon. Friend agree that, if we successfully continue those strong policies, exports will be one of the most effective ways in which to create the jobs that we need for the future as well?

Mrs. Knight: My hon. Friend is right. We have not just a good export performance with visibles, but an outstanding one with invisibles. One of the reasons why our performance is so good is because of this country's competitive climate, which the Government are determined to maintain. We will ensure that we have low taxation for companies, low inflation, interest rates as low as possible and no social chapter, which would destroy jobs.

Mr. Shore: The Minister conveys good news about the growth in British exports, but she has not mentioned imports. Is she assuring us that this year's outturn will be that Britain has had, for the first time in eight years, a balance, if not a surplus, in its transactions with the rest of the world?

Mrs. Knight: As would be expected, we have had a small increase in imports as a consequence of the UK economy's growth, but we have also had an outstanding performance in other sectors. The right hon. Gentleman rightly points to the British trading performance with other countries. I assure him that, in 1994, the UK had current account surpluses with the United States, Japan, the Asian tiger economies and the Group of Seven countries. I am sure that he will agree that that is an outstanding performance.

Public Sector Borrowing Requirement

2. **Mr. Jenkin:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the latest projection for the public sector borrowing requirement in the current financial year; and if he will make a statement. [28490]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. William Waldegrave): The Budget forecast of the PSBR in 1996-97 was £22½ billion. An updated forecast of the PSBR will be published in the summer economic forecast on 9 July. Excluding privatisation proceeds, the PSBR fell by £8 billion in 1995-96.

Mr. Jenkin: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, although borrowing remains high, tax cuts, however desirable they may be, should not be imposed on the economy at the wrong moment? We remain, however, committed to reducing taxation because we regard taxes not as a bribe, but as being vital for the British economy's future competitiveness.

Mr. Waldegrave: The fundamental difference between Conservative Members and Labour Members is that we stand for cutting taxes and they stand for bigger spending. We will seek to cut taxes, but it must be based on proper control of expenditure, which, in the past three years, we have been delivering much better than any Government for many decades. Future taxation cuts must be based on tough control of public spending.

Mr. Sheldon: Is the Chief Secretary aware that the European Commission has forecast that, next year, this country's financial deficit will be worse than that of any other European Community country apart from Italy and Greece? As the criterion for economic and monetary union is based on that, how does he intend to meet that criterion, if he were to decide to enter EMU?

Mr. Waldegrave: The Community's deficit forecasts yesterday, especially those for the French and German Governments, fell quite smartly. If they go on falling so smartly, they will have disappeared altogether by tomorrow teatime. The Community's forecast for our deficit is based, I am sorry to say, on an assumption that there will be about £10 billion more spending. That will not come from the Conservatives. I fear that the Community may have fallen into the trap of thinking that we are going to have a Labour Government, which of course we are not. That is the only explanation for it assuming at least another £10 billion of spending.

Mr. Marlow: As my right hon. Friend has said, borrowing is one of the convergence criteria for monetary union. Regardless of whether Britain joins the monetary union on 1 January 1999, it is of great interest to the UK whether other countries in Europe do. What is my right hon. Friend's full view on whether Germany and France will meet the convergence criteria for borrowing?

Mr. Waldegrave: I entirely accept the view put forward by their Governments that they will do remarkable things to public spending and hit the targets. Let us hope so. It would be very good for the economy of Europe if they better controlled spending and joined us in what the International Monetary Fund calls the group of low-spending countries with flexible economies. That would be good for them and, indeed, for us.

Mr. Harvey: Will the Government give a commitment that they will set tax levels in this year's Budget that will deliver a borrowing requirement next year within the 3 per cent. Maastricht convergence criteria?

Mr. Waldegrave: I do not think that my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor, who is responsible for those matters, entirely takes the view of Commissioner De Silguy. There was a slight mixture in the Commissioner's report yesterday. There was a grey area about growth—unfortunately, only the British had any growth—and there was a rosy area that all the other countries were converging. I would rather stand at this Dispatch Box, as I think would my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor, delivering the best growth in Europe, the lowest unemployment in Europe and doing the right thing for the British economy. That is what my right hon. and learned Friend will continue to do.

Dr. Spink: Does my right hon. Friend agree that if we could cut public spending to 35 per cent. of the national wealth, it would enable us not only to lower the PSBR, but to continue to grow at a fast rate and therefore create the wealth that we need if we are to care better for vulnerable people?

Mr. Waldegrave: We have to get spending as a proportion of national income down to 40 per cent. before we get it down to 35 per cent. My hon. Friend makes a sound point. It was very interesting that a recent very detailed IMF study showed that the high-spending group—fundamentally the northern Europeans, such as Sweden, which spends up to 70 per cent. of GDP, while France and Germany spend very much more than we do—does not seem to benefit from it, certainly not economically, and not even in welfare terms. So the argument about bringing down the Government's public spending as a share of GDP should be undertaken not only for economic reasons but because of jobs and welfare in the economy.

Mr. Andrew Smith: To bring the Chief Secretary back to some coherence and the United Kingdom, given that public borrowing last year overshot by £10.7 billion and independent City forecasts are already saying that this year it will overshoot by £3.6 billion, will the right hon. Gentleman admit that the weak state of public finances, which is not only due to the Government getting their forecast wrong, privatisation receipts being lower than expected, or even because VAT and corporation tax receipts are lower, but is because growth has been lower than the Chancellor promised, means that the British people will not be able to believe a single word that the Government say about the state of public finances between now and the general election?

Mr. Waldegrave: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will tell us whether he wants to cut spending or put up taxes. I do not think that he wants to do either.

Mr. Tony Banks: Wait and see.

Mr. Waldegrave: "Wait and see", says the hon. Gentleman with some nervousness from the Back Benches. The UK is the only major country that has cut its debt-to-GDP ratio since 1979. All the other big economies' ratios have gone up. Does anybody believe that that would have happened if Labour had stayed in power after 1979? Of course not.

Mr. Congdon: In view of the nervousness that Opposition Members have expressed in the Chamber because the Government will be in a position to offer more tax cuts in the November Budget, will my right hon. Friend confirm that we shall continue to restrain public spending so as to provide room for tax cuts that will give people more money in their pockets to spend in the way that they think best, rather than their being dictated to by Government, as is proposed by the Labour party?

Mr. Waldegrave: There are two fundamental Conservative criteria, the first of which is to maintain sound management of the economy. The European Community report published yesterday put us at the top of the growth league not only for next year but for the following two years as well. The most fundamental benefit that my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor has delivered to our economy is sound low-inflation growth, and we shall not throw that away. Of course we shall continue to seek expenditure cuts, and if it is safe to do so, no doubt my right hon. and learned Friend will consider tax cuts—but only if we can find the expenditure savings.

Drugs (Scotland)

3. **Mr. Wallace:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what volume of drugs, and of what value, were seized by officers of Her Majesty's Customs and Excise in Scotland in 1995. [28491]

The Paymaster General (Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory): In 1995, customs anti-smuggling staff in Scotland seized 6 g of cocaine, 12.4 kg of cannabis, 402 doses of LSD and 7 g of other prohibited drugs. The estimated street level value of these seizures was approximately £40,000.

Mr. Wallace: I am sure that the Minister, like me, would wish to congratulate the Customs and Excise officers, who are an important front line in the battle against drugs. However, does he accept that there is considerable concern in the highlands and islands about job reductions in Customs and Excise, and the proposed

closures of customs offices, which will leave vast areas and a considerable length of coastline open and vulnerable to those who want to exploit it to import illegal drugs?

Intelligence gathering cannot simply be switched on and off; it requires people to be in communities for a long time, to build up confidence. Will the Minister therefore review the proposed closures of Customs and Excise offices in the north of Scotland?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: That matter has already been reviewed by Customs and Excise, which concluded that the anti-smuggling effort was unnecessarily fragmented, and decided to group its officers into fewer but larger units, and to rely more on investigation and intelligence.

Mrs. Lait: I congratulate Customs and Excise in Scotland on its successful record on drugs, but can my right hon. Friend give me some idea of how successful it has been in counteracting bootlegging, which affects Scotland as much as it affects southern England?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: My hon. Friend has raised that matter with Ministers on many occasions, and I take her observation seriously, because she represents a coastal constituency affected by cross-border traffic and the smuggling of alcohol and tobacco. I assure her that Customs and Excise is renewing its efforts to keep out bootlegged or smuggled products. There will be no relaxation of the efforts to beat that traffic, which undermines not only the Revenue but legitimate traders.

Taxation

4. **Mr. McFall:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received on (a) direct and (b) indirect taxation levels. [28492]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Kenneth Clarke): I have received a number of representations from the public and business on the levels of direct and indirect taxation, many of which welcomed the tax cuts in last year's Budget.

Mr. McFall: In view of the 24 separate tax rises since 1992, will the Chancellor admit that the Government have succumbed to the seven-week itch—the equivalent of a new tax on the British people every seven weeks? Will he now admit that the typical family is £670 a year worse off than it was in 1992? The message, loud and clear, is that one cannot trust the Tories on taxation.

Mr. Clarke: The decisions that we took, which were tough ones to get public borrowing under control, paved the way for lower taxation last November, increased growth in the economy, falling unemployment, low inflation and rising living standards. The average family is £450 a year better off this year, as a result of the combined effect of rising living standards and falling taxation.

Only yesterday the Labour party committed itself again to a windfall tax that would put up the prices of electricity, gas and water, and drive down shareholder value in the companies, so it is that party which, in that and many other ways, poses the threat of higher taxation if it ever gets the chance to impose it.

Mr. John Townend: My right hon. and learned Friend will be aware that I agree with him that irresponsible tax cuts would not receive the support of Conservative Members. However, does he agree with me that if tax cuts are paid for by spending cuts, they are not bribes but the rewards of good Conservative government?

Mr. Clarke: The Government are committed to the control of public spending, low public borrowing, low inflation and lower taxation. We are committed to lowering the standard rate of taxation to 20p, and a quarter of taxpayers are already on 20p. We will deliver that at a time when we deliver all our other objectives. As my hon. Friend knows, that is exactly what we delivered in last year's Budget, and that is what we are committed to carry on delivering, for the good of the economy of this country.

Mr. Gordon Brown: Will the Chancellor confirm to the House that a mistake was made in his Budget calculations of tax revenues—a mistake that means that his Budget strategy and his scope for tax cuts in November is now unravelling? Will he tell the House the truth about the scale of the mistake on tax revenues? Will he tell us whether it is higher than the £4.4 billion mistake that was made last year in calculating tax revenues? Will he confirm that that is another example of Conservative economic policy—still hurting but still not working? Will he, therefore, agree to the independent audit on the state of public finances that I have proposed—so that the Conservative party can never again deceive the public about the state of public finances?

Mr. Clarke: Every Government, for the past 20 years and more, have been committed to producing two economic forecasts each year, and we adjust those forecasts. The forecasts of tax revenue have been produced. They are always the best forecasts that we have available, and we adjust policy accordingly. Will the hon. Gentleman say whether he, with his super-Treasury, is putting into his forecasts assessments of what it will cost families to have child benefit taken away if a child stays on in the sixth form, or what it will cost people who pay their electricity and gas bills when he brings in his windfall tax? He knows perfectly well that, as my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury said, we are running the economy well on the basis of the forecasts that we are making. The Commission's forecasts appear to be based on huge public spending commitments that he, as shadow Chancellor, keeps making.

Income Tax

5. **Mr. David Shaw:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent representations he has received regarding the lower rate of income tax. [28493]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Michael Jack): The Chancellor receives a steady flow of representations and letters regarding all aspects of the tax system.

Mr. Shaw: Can my hon. Friend confirm that the Government are well on the way to a 20 per cent. basic rate of income tax? Can we, please, have it soon? Will he also confirm that the Opposition are split on whether to have higher taxes or lower taxes?

Mr. Jack: I can certainly confirm to my hon. Friend that my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor in the most recent Budget took three steps towards his long-term stated objective of a basic rate of a 20p tax. At least we have a clear policy. Opposition Members are like a pack of yelping dogs—as soon as one gets out ahead with an idea, the others bite him. All we hear is the yapping of uncertainty.

Mrs. Anne Campbell: Will the Minister confirm that it is now Government policy to abolish inheritance tax and capital gains tax? Will he confirm that that will cost £4.6 billion by the end of the century? Is that, in fact, his policy—a policy that will benefit very few people—or is his priority to lower income tax, which will benefit very many more people?

Mr. Jack: I find the hon. Lady's comments somewhat astonishing. She seems to attack our desire to ensure that people who have worked during their lives can continue to keep some of that wealth and pass it on to their families. We noted that the Labour party voted against our proposal in the Finance Bill to increase the level of allowance on inheritance tax. Labour has no clear policy on capital gains tax. We realise that that tax distorts investment. That is why our long-term objective is to remove it.

European Central Bank

6. **Mr. Carrington:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he is next to meet his fellow European Finance Ministers to discuss the establishment of the European central bank; and if he will make a statement. [28495]

7. **Mr. Gapes:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he next plans to meet his German counterpart to discuss economic and monetary union. [28496]

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: I regularly meet my fellow European Finance Ministers to discuss a range of issues, including economic and monetary union. The next such meeting will take place on 3 June.

Mr. Carrington: Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that if the European central bank comes into existence, it should reach its decisions on monetary policy in as open and accountable a way as he, with the Governor of the Bank of England, currently reaches decisions on monetary policy in this country?

Mr. Clarke: The European central bank is based on the concept of having an independent central bank with governors coming from all the central banks of the countries participating. It has a strict injunction laid on it to preserve the value of the currency and price stability, which would be essential. We have not even begun to discuss how that monetary policy will be delivered in practice, and, of course, it will rather depend on whether we are participating. I should certainly commend and wish to see in it the openness of policy that we have in this country, which has given greatly added credibility to the Government's determination to keep down inflation.

Mr. Gapes: In view of the remarks made yesterday by President Chirac and the Commission's report, does the Chancellor agree that it is now more likely that a single currency will be established? If so, is it still his view that the single currency is no threat to the nation state?

Mr. Clarke: The President yesterday asserted the position of the French Government. They are determined to achieve the convergence standards and go ahead with economic and monetary union on the timetable. My view is that the convergence criteria are more important than the timetable. I do not accept the Commission's forecast put out yesterday, for the reasons already given by me and by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

Our policy will be set on achieving the convergence criteria because it is good common sense to move down towards a balanced budget and low inflation. Combined with other Government policies, that policy will continue to create economic growth.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that some of the words used by Mr. Chirac this time round may display his own concern that, should Britain take the decision not to enter the single currency, it may well be to the detriment of the others because of our competitiveness, which may be improved as a result?

Mr. Clarke: One of the things that I do not do here is answer for President Chirac, although I am fairly familiar with his views. He made it plain yesterday in the two speeches that I heard him give that his preference would be for the United Kingdom to participate in the single currency because he believes that that would be for the good of the rest of Europe and of France and the United Kingdom. We shall make our decision on our judgment of British interests, when and if the time comes.

Mr. Skinner: Why does not the Chancellor tell the European bankers, Chirac and anybody else—*[Interruption.]* it will do for me—that all this talk about a drive towards a central currency is much ado about nothing? It was going to be here by 1995, then it was 1997 and now it has been put back to 1999. The momentum has gone. Why does he not address a more important matter? The public sector borrowing requirement in Britain has been calculated wrongly in the last two years. It is more than £10 billion higher than it was supposed to be. Yet strangely the Tory party central office has managed to wipe out its deficit of £19 million and turn it into a surplus of £26 million. How many bribes and favours for that? If he can do it for the Tory party central office, why cannot he wipe out the debts of the nation?

Mr. Clarke: On the first point, I advise the hon. Gentleman to deliver his message to President Chirac himself. I do not think that I could rival his Bolsover French accent and he would put it best in his own impeccable way. On the second point, the Opposition are reduced to a pathetic state when they scrabble about with changes in the forecast for the PSBR. Look at what has happened to it. It was £8 billion down last year compared with the year before and £16 billion down compared with the year before that. We are on course for a balance in the medium term. That is why internationally people have confidence. We will achieve growth, falling unemployment and rising prosperity in this country.

Sir Peter Tapsell: Will my right hon. and learned Friend explain to the House his views about this proposed European central bank? He will recall from his careful studies of the Maastricht treaty that it would be entirely undemocratic and not answerable to any parliamentary organisation. As the treaty makes clear, it would be a criminal offence to try to influence its decisions in any way. It would have no interest in the maintenance of high levels of employment. Are we really even contemplating joining such an undemocratic institution in any circumstances whatever?

Mr. Clarke: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his studies of the Maastricht treaty, but if he is not careful I shall start trying to swap knowledge of the treaty with him, as I think mine is rather better. He has found some details in the treaty. The European central bank is intended to be an independent central bank, just as Germany has an independent Bundesbank and the United States has an independent Federal Reserve. That would be important for this country if ever we contemplated making the Bank of England independent, and I think that there are mixed views in this House about that. It is not, however, the most critical feature of the Maastricht treaty.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Will the Chancellor confirm that he wants Britain to be in a position to choose whether to enter a single currency? The report from the European Commission yesterday predicted that the British Government's handling of public finances means that the Budget deficit will exceed 3 per cent. of GDP and will fail to meet the convergence criteria. The Government agreed those criteria at Maastricht. Are they so bad at managing public finances that they will not comply with what they have signed up to? Is it possible that Britain will not be in a position to choose whether to enter a single currency because of the Government's mismanagement of the economy?

Mr. Clarke: The Opposition have so little to say about what is happening now in the British economy that they keep scrambling about with these wretched forecasts. The Commission is forecasting growth and low inflation, but for some reason it is also forecasting a loss of public spending control. But as my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary has said, that is not conceivable from a Government who, for the past three years, have delivered the tightest public spending control of any Government since the war. This year, for the first time in my recollection, we are anticipating a real terms reduction in the total of public spending while we continue to increase resources for our priority public services.

The threat to convergence—and the overall threat to the British economy—comes from the Opposition's proposed super-Treasury, with its new taxation and its ability to raise money in many other ways, including, for example, from people whose children stay on at school. There is no doubt that the shadow Chancellor dares not produce his other proposals because his colleagues will line up in turn to shoot them down and dissociate themselves from these wholly undesirable measures.

Mr. Forman: If there were to be a European central bank in, say, 1999 and if this country were to contribute to it because we had decided to join a single currency, does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that it is important, bearing in mind the traditions of the House, that we should seek to get as much public and parliamentary accountability to that body as possible? Does he think that such a bank should be accountable to the Economic and Finance Council—and hence to the various national Parliaments—or to the European Assembly? I would prefer the former.

Mr. Clarke: The bank certainly would be accountable to ECOFIN. I am seeking to establish in the present discussions that the European central bank must undertake certain obligations towards the non-member states as well as to the member states, and take into account the impact on non-member states in EMU, as well as member states, of the decisions it takes. The central bank would be bound by its legal obligations to deliver stability of currency and low inflation. One should encourage the maximum amount of openness in that.

I am not in favour of making these decisions subject to the European Parliament. I do not think that such decisions in any country should be subject to short-term political considerations, and that is why I am in favour of openness and a declared inflation target—something Labour does not have. *[Interruption.]* Of course I am accountable to this House for the decisions that I take, but I actually account for the framework of policy. In my lifetime, the House of Commons has never in advance of interest rate changes instructed the Chancellor as to what the rate should be.

Investment

8. **Mr. Livingstone:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the proportion of gross domestic product devoted to investment in (a) the United Kingdom and (b) other G7 nations; and what plans he has to improve the United Kingdom levels of investment. [28497]

13. **Mr. Geoffrey Robinson:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on investment levels in (a) the United Kingdom and (b) other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries. [28502]

Mr. Waldegrave: Detailed comparative figures for investment by G7 nations and others are available in the OECD's national accounts statistics in the Library. Since 1979, business investment as a percentage of GDP has been higher in the UK than in the US, Germany, France and Italy.

Mr. Livingstone: Does the Chief Secretary agree that manufacturing investment in Britain is still lower than it was in 1979? He invokes business investment. Does he remember that the Budget projections in November 1994 expected that there would be a 10 per cent. increase in business investment? Did it not turn out to be 2.3 per cent.? Is it not the case that investment in Britain is still being squeezed out by dividend payments that, in the last quarter of the past year, were running at an annual rate of 6.6 per cent. of GDP?

Mr. Waldegrave: I have been reading the hon. Gentleman's views on this because, unlike his Front-Bench colleagues, he has some coherent ideas.

His piece in the *Socialist Economic Bulletin* shows that he has a coherent theory about how the economy works. His theory is wrong because he believes that increasing profits and dividends are inimical to the development of investment, which is contrary to common sense. The fact that we are top of the business investment league table, regardless of the figures for one month—which he may find will be revised—is an earnest of the fact that we will get more jobs in future. However, his Front-Bench colleagues take a different view. The hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), in delivering what the *Financial Times* called a robust defence of income inequalities to KPMG—not the favourite firm of the hon. Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown)—takes a different view from the hon. Gentleman. [HON. MEMBERS: "Too long."] That is why the *Financial Times* described—

Madam Speaker: Order. Ministers must give brisk answers. I call Mr. Geoffrey Robinson. [HON. MEMBERS: "Come on; get up!"] I call Mr. Geoffrey Robinson. The hon. Gentleman's question was linked to Question 8. The Minister has answered the supplementary question to that and the hon. Gentleman can now put his supplementary to Question 13.

Mr. Robinson: It is a disgraceful performance by the Government that manufacturing investment is still below what it was in 1979. The Chancellor could improve the situation by dealing with capital allowances as has been proposed by my hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor.

Mr. Waldegrave: I apologise, Madam Speaker. I gave too long an answer to the previous question because I was trying to give the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson) time to collect his wits. Unfortunately, you cut me off before he could. He asked a question that I had already answered and he should read *Hansard* to find the answer.

Mr. Stephen: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the best way for a business to finance future investment is to retain in that business the profits that it has generated? Will he therefore undertake to abolish inheritance tax and restructure capital gains tax to enable businesses to retain profits for future investment?

Mr. Waldegrave: Conservative Members understand the importance of lifting the burden of capital taxation to the overall long-term performance of the economy. That is one of the things that divides us from the Labour party. We will do it only when it is safe to do so in economic terms, but my hon. Friend must be right.

Mr. Quentin Davies: I am sure that my right hon. Friend agrees that what is important for future output, and therefore prosperity, is the level of business investment as a whole. Will he set out the figures for business investment in Britain and compare them with those of our major competitor countries?

Mr. Waldegrave: We have put ourselves at the top of the business investment league table. I will place the full table in the Library because it is rather long. It would greatly benefit Labour Members to realise that one of the major achievements since 1979 has been to turn round the fact that Britain used to lag on business investment when compared with other European countries in the 1960s and 1970s, but that has now changed, which is a fact of fundamental importance.

Value Added Tax

9. **Mr. Hain:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent representations have been made to him on VAT receipts. [28498]

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: My right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor has received no recent correspondence regarding VAT receipts.

Mr. Hain: Is not the significant shortfall in VAT receipts contributing to the huge hole in the Government's finances? Is not that evidence of continuing economic insecurity and the fact that there is no feel-good factor? Why do not the Government change their slogan? Not only has it been hurting, but it still is not working.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: It is working and the strength in the economy has already been outlined by both my right hon. Friends during this Question Time. To answer the hon. Gentleman's question, the VAT receipts for the financial year just ended came in near to the Budget target announced at the end of last year.

Mr. Allason: Does my right hon. Friend accept that, as the Government accept the principle of variable rates of VAT, the tourism industry is anxious to have a reduced VAT rate, particularly on catering and hotel accommodation, which would be a great assistance, particularly in the south-west, where his constituency is involved in tourism?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I do not accept my hon. Friend's suggestion. Where possible, we want a simple VAT system, which is easy to administer. There is no valid case for a zero or reduced rate for tourism services. As my hon. Friend will know, the British tourist industry had another record year last year.

Ms Primarolo: Is the Paymaster General aware that the Chancellor admitted on "On the Record" last Sunday, that he had "made a mistake" in the calculations for tax revenues in the Budget? Is that because he also made a mistake in the forecast for growth in the economy? The truth is that public finances are in a mess and he is looking for creative accounting to try to cook the books. The Tories cannot be trusted in what they tell the nation, unless they tell the truth, which they are clearly incapable of doing.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: That was not a direct quotation of my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor, so the hon. Lady's question was about as accurate as her other observations about the British economy.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that a sharp rise in income tax would hardly do wonders for the retail sector and that, under a Labour Government, VAT receipts would probably fall sharply as a result?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: My hon. Friend is correct. VAT receipts are very much related to disposable income and consumption, both of which would be dealt a body blow by the tax policies—in so far as any of us know them—of the Labour party. The Opposition undoubtedly have a hidden agenda on tax. We are beginning to see little parts of it and they are still squabbling about it, but it scares the wits out of the country out there and we must never allow it to come about.

Manufacturing Industry (Investment)

10. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent representations he has received from the Engineering Employers Federation on investment in the manufacturing industry. [28499]

Mrs. Angela Knight: None, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Flynn: When the hon. Lady next meets the federation, will she explain why the Government's policies are definitely hurting, but certainly not working? Is the reason for that the 24, record tax increases by this Government, or is it because investment in manufacturing industry is less now than it was in 1979 and there has been a loss of 600,000 jobs in that industry in the past five years?

Mrs. Knight: The hon. Gentleman should look at the facts, which show that we have a growing economy and businesses that are competitive and making jobs for people. In fact, he might like to know that we have more people in work than any other major country in Europe. Our manufacturing investment is up and the increase is about 7.5 per cent. over last year. It is about time that the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends on the Opposition Benches stopped running down the country and running down companies in this country.

Mr. John Marshall: Does my hon. Friend accept that even more important than the level of investment is the quality of investment? What does she think would happen to the level of inward investment, which has transformed sectors of the British economy and even brought jobs to Newport, if we were to introduce a national minimum wage and a social chapter, as advocated by the Labour party?

Mrs. Knight: My hon. Friend is right. The Government's policies have attracted inward investment into this country; the Labour party's policies would frighten it away. The social chapter and the minimum wage would be the biggest job destruction taxes that could be placed on British people.

Mr. Darling: Perhaps this Minister can tell us—why is manufacturing investment less than it was in 1979?

Mrs. Knight: The hon. Gentleman still refuses to acknowledge the fact that manufacturing investment has increased, that our companies are investing, and that all the surveys show that they are looking at life very positively. The Conservative Government have ensured that companies can flourish. I understand that, under the last Labour Government, companies died.

Privatisation

11. **Mr. Jacques Arnold:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact of privatisation on the expenses of the average household. [28500]

Mr. Jack: Household bills for water, gas and electricity combined have been cut by 9 per cent., or £75 a year, and residential telephone bills are down by 13 per cent. in real terms since 1990.

Mr. Arnold: My hon. Friend has demonstrated the advantages to households of our policy of privatisation. Would he highlight the advantages for investors in shares in the privatised industries that have been derived from privatisation? I am thinking, for example, of the investment of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, which sponsors the deputy leader of the Labour party, which has benefited greatly from its investments in, for instance, Eastern Electricity, Thames Water, Cable and Wireless and British Gas.

Mr. Jack: My hon. Friend is right to show that the RMT has recognised the strength and benefits of privatisation, as Labour local authorities have done. Camden has invested £26.6 million in privatisation, Derbyshire £60 million, Gwent £47 million and even Islington £24 million. They recognise a good thing when they see it.

PRIME MINISTER

Engagements

Q1. **Mr. Dowd:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 16 May. [28478]

The Prime Minister (Mr. John Major): This morning, I presided at a meeting of the Cabinet and had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further meetings later today.

Mr. Dowd: Why does the Prime Minister now find it impossible to condemn the proven wrongdoing at Westminster city council under Dame Shirley Porter when, on 20 June 1995, from that Dispatch Box, he had no such compunction in condemning Monklands district council, even though the inquiry set up by the Secretary of State for Scotland was still under way?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman overlooks the Labour party's internal report, to which I had referred.

Q2. **Mr. Rathbone:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 16 May. [28479]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Rathbone: Will my right hon. Friend accept my congratulations and thanks for his commitment to the Government strategy "Tackling Drugs Together", as evidenced most particularly by his involvement with young people last Tuesday?

Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming yesterday's announcement of the fall of unemployment to a five-year low, and recommit himself and the Government to training more people for more jobs, rather than throwing them out of education by taking away child benefit from teenagers?

The Prime Minister: There is no doubt about the importance of a comprehensive strategy to deal with drugs among our young people, and we have made a great deal of progress on that in the past year. There is a great deal more to be done. That work devolves, not only on schools, parents, community leaders and the police, but on all of us. We should all, in our own way, give a lead by ensuring that teenagers realise the dangers of drugs.

Yesterday's unemployment figures were further good news, as were the figures on inflation published earlier today. My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the fact that abolishing child benefit for teenagers would do nothing to help shorten the dole queues; I believe that many members of the Labour party fully understand that.

It is good to see the shadow Chancellor here, in the same room as his colleagues. I hope that, as he sits on the Front Bench chattering to them, they may discuss child benefit.

Mr. Blair: Has the Prime Minister seen the highly critical comments of the British beef exporters in relation to the Government's handling of BSE? I appreciate the Government's difficulties in this regard. However, in the light of those comments and the comments of farmers yesterday, is the Prime Minister satisfied that everything that should be done is being done in relation to BSE?

The Prime Minister: We are well advanced in this matter and we are taking our case to our European partners. The ban is unjustified and it should be removed. We have had some progress. Before yesterday, we did not have the support of any of our European partners on any of the issues. Yesterday, half of the European Union supported our position in relation to gelatine, tallow and semen. According to the Agriculture Commissioner, there is every prospect that we will get a satisfactory result on Monday.

However, we need to look not only at the lifting of that ban but at the lifting of the ban on beef generally. We will discuss a detailed series of proposals with the Commission, which we hope will persuade it to support us in encouraging our European partners to lift the ban. The ban is unjustified. All that can credibly be done is being done and will continue to be done.

Mr. Blair: I put it to the Prime Minister that many farmers say that they do not know where to take their cattle for collection and that the approved list of abattoirs keeps changing—for example, some abattoirs that should be working are not working. Yesterday, we were told that it will take six weeks for the cold storage facilities to be up and running. In the meantime, there is a backlog of approximately 120,000 cattle. In the light of what appears to be a widespread gap between the perception of Ministers and the reality of what is happening, will the Prime Minister redouble his efforts?

The Prime Minister: I assure the right hon. Gentleman that everything that can be done is being done to ensure that we speed up the slaughter of cattle that need to be slaughtered. There is a genuine problem that is not readily solvable—that is, the requirement to slaughter cattle exceeds the capacity of the industry to do so, even working at full rate. Some cattle will be put into cold storage, but that cannot happen until they have been at least partly rendered. The rendering industry is working at full capacity. Ministers and the industry are addressing their minds to solving those problems.

Mr. Blair: It might be said, to coin a phrase, that it is hurting but it is not working. I put a related point to the Prime Minister. We are now embarking on a 30-month cattle slaughter policy without a guarantee from the European Union that the ban will be lifted. Do we have an assurance from our European partners that, if a package is agreed, we will have full compensation? We are planning to spend £2.5 billion to £3 billion over the next few years and only 30 per cent. will be guaranteed in return. In the meantime, there is no guarantee that the ban will be lifted.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman has referred to matters that are the subject of discussion with the Commission at the moment. The problem is not the Commission; the problem is the member states in the European Union. The first mechanism to ensure that the member states change their position and lift their ban is to reach a practical agreement with the Commission about how we deal with the general problem of BSE. It is not a question of dealing with what our European partners wish to do; it is a question of dealing with a proper strategy that will put the British beef industry back into a position in which it will export not only to Europe but to the United States and to New Zealand, which banned British beef some time ago. That is in the interests of our beef industry and it is foremost in our mind at the moment.

Q3. **Mr. John Townend:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 16 May. [28480]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Townend: Has my right hon. Friend had time to study the speech of the shadow Secretary of State for Education and Employment at the weekend, when he said that Labour—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. I must hear the question. Is the hon. Gentleman asking about Government policy?

Mr. Townend: I am asking what our response is to the hon. Gentleman's policy.

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman knows that the Prime Minister is responsible only for Government policy, not for another party's policy.

Mr. Townend: Is my right hon. Friend aware of the suggestion made at the weekend by the shadow spokesman for employment that a Labour Government would redistribute wealth? In plain language, does that

not mean increasing taxes for the middle classes? Is that not old Labour—real Labour—which would tax out of envy? Does it not show that the Labour party is a high-tax party? Will my right hon. Friend do everything possible to strengthen our reputation as a low-tax party?

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has been here long enough to know the rules. We are going to pass on that question. If that is the best that he can do, I am calling Mr. Ashdown. Try harder than Mr. Townend.

Mr. Ashdown: The farmers came here yesterday to complain not about the ban, but about the Government's bungling. The Prime Minister has told us that the medicine is hurting, but it is working. How is it working for farmers who are losing their livelihoods because of the Government's mismanagement of the matter? How is it working for pupils who are paying for tax bribes with rising class sizes? How is it working for the increasing number of young couples with negative equity who are facing house repossessions? Is it not perfectly clear that the Government offer the country not a continuation of the cure, but more of the poison?

The Prime Minister: It was very prescient of you, Madam Speaker, to tell the right hon. Gentleman to try harder. That is very appropriate.

The right hon. Gentleman, who is very keen to tell the House how strong a European he is, might recall that it is our European partners who have banned British beef unjustifiably on scientific grounds. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will try harder to persuade them that their ban is unjustified and, for once, join the Government in defending the interests of this country and of British agriculture.

As to the extent that our policies are working, I know that the right hon. Gentleman finds it disobliging to hear that at the moment inflation, interest rates and unemployment are down and investments, exports and production are up. The right hon. Gentleman could find no other country in the European Union whose leader could make that claim in its Parliament.

Q4. **Mr. Patrick Thompson:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 16 May. [28481]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Thompson: Bearing in mind the Government's positive and very welcome response to the report of the working group on school security, is my right hon. Friend aware of the recent gun attack on Dowson first school in Valpy avenue in Norwich, North when the art room was showered with glass? Fortunately, the incident occurred during the break when there were no children in the room. Will the Government use the extra resources that they have promised to provide protection measures in that school because parents are at present unwilling to allow their children to return to class?

The Prime Minister: I share my hon. Friend's concern to ensure that schools are as safe and secure as they reasonably can be. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has heard my hon. Friend's comments about the school in his constituency. I made it clear in the House on Tuesday that we will implement the recommendations of the working group on school security as soon as practicable—there are obviously issues to be examined before it can be taken in hand fully. We have already implemented some recommendations, including introducing measures to strengthen the law on offensive weapons in schools. It is an important matter and I assure my hon. Friend that there will be no undue delay.

Mr. Salmond: May I take the Prime Minister back to 1981 when he was working in the public relations department of Standard Chartered bank and I was working for the Royal Bank of Scotland? The Monopolies and Mergers Commission ruled out a merger between those two organisations as against the Scottish public interest. Does the Prime Minister agree that—despite some dodgy lending decisions, such as the Tory party overdraft—the Royal Bank has been a fair success over the past 15 years as an independent organisation, as it has been over the past 300 years? If there were to be a hostile bid for Scotland's other—

Madam Speaker: Order. What has this to do with the Prime Minister?

Mr. Salmond: I am coming to that.

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must come to order and resume his seat. If he can tell me what the question has to do with the Prime Minister, I will allow it.

Mr. Salmond: If there were a hostile bid for Scotland's other major clearer, the Bank of Scotland, would the Prime Minister say that that should be referred to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission and would the Scottish public interest once again be a determining feature in the outcome of such a bid?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman knows, that is a matter for my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade, who has to consider each case on its merits. He will consider each case, but I can give the hon. Gentleman no indication of what my right hon. Friend's decision might be. That is for him and he would have to discuss and consider it.

Dartmouth

Q5. **Mr. Steen:** To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to pay an official visit to Dartmouth. [28482]

The Prime Minister: I have at present no plans to do so.

Mr. Steen: Is the Prime Minister aware of the deep sense of outrage and injustice felt by south Devon fishermen as a result of the abuse by the Spanish of flags of convenience which results in 20 per cent. of the British quota being landed in foreign ports by the Spanish fleet? Will he take the opportunity at the intergovernmental conference to let the other countries in Europe know how committed he is to the British fishermen and that he will

not tolerate that injustice any longer? Britain deserves something better from Europe and, because it does a lot for Europe, it deserves something back.

The Prime Minister: Yes, I intend to raise that matter at the intergovernmental conference. Foreign-owned vessels cannot, of course, obtain British quotas at will, but it is possible to buy a British vessel with a licence and then fish against the United Kingdom quota. Although that is legal, it was certainly not what was intended when the common fisheries policy was established or when the House approved the common fisheries policy. The intention was that national quotas would be available for national fishermen, to the advantage of the whole Community, and I intend to raise that point at the intergovernmental conference. I have advised our European partners of that and we expect that there will be changes at the IGC and, of course, the conference cannot reach a conclusion without unanimity.

Business of the House

3.32 pm

Mrs. Ann Taylor (Dewsbury): May I ask the Leader of the House for details of future business?

The Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. Tony Newton): The business of the House that I propose is as follows:

MONDAY 20 MAY—Remaining stages of the Reserve Forces Bill *[Lords]*.

Proceedings on the Commonwealth Development Corporation Bill.

TUESDAY 21 MAY—Second Reading of the Defamation Bill *[Lords]*.

Proceedings on the following consolidation measures: the Police Bill *[Lords]*; the Industrial Tribunals Bill *[Lords]*; the Employment Rights Bill *[Lords]*.

The Chairman of Ways and Means has named opposed private business for consideration at 7 o'clock.

WEDNESDAY 22 MAY—Until 2 o'clock, there will be debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House. That will be the three hours of general debate prior to the recess, together with two other debates.

Until 7 o'clock, debate on developments in the civil service on a Government motion.

Motion on the Council Tax Limitation (England) (Maximum Amounts) Order.

The House will rise for the spring Adjournment on Wednesday 22 May until Tuesday 4 June.

On a more provisional basis, the business for the week back after the Whitsun recess will be as follows:

TUESDAY 4 JUNE—Second Reading of the Education (Scotland) Bill [*Lords*].

WEDNESDAY 5 JUNE—Until 2 o'clock, there will be debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House, followed in the afternoon by a motion relating to the Housing Benefit (General) Amendment Regulations, a motion on the Fishing Vessels (Decommissioning) Scheme, and a motion relating to the third report from the Procedure Committee on the use of Welsh in parliamentary proceedings in Wales.

THURSDAY 6 JUNE—Debate on the Royal Air Force on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

FRIDAY 7 JUNE—Debate on sport on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

The House will also wish to know that, on Wednesday 22 May there will be a debate on transport pricing in European Standing Committee A. Details of the relevant documents will be given in the *Official Report*.

The House will also wish to know that it is proposed that, on Wednesday 5 June, there will be a debate on driving licences in European Standing Committee A.

[Wednesday 22 May:

European Standing Committee A—European Community document: 5179/96, Transport Pricing; Relevant European Legislation Committee Report HC 51-xiv (1995-96).

Wednesday 5 June:

European Standing Committee A—European Community Document: 5415/96, Driving Licences; Relevant European Legislation Committee Report HC 51-xvii (1995-96).]

Mrs. Taylor: I thank the Leader of the House, and I start by asking him about two Bills that he has not mentioned.

The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Family Law Bill comes out of Committee today. It is clearly reasonable not to have the Report stage in the first week back after the Whitsun recess, but, in view of the speculation about the measure's ultimate fate, can the Leader of the House tell us what is the Government's attitude to the Bill in its present form?

The other Bill about which we have heard little, and which I have raised on more than one occasion with the Leader of the House, is the Community Care (Direct Payments) Bill. That completed its Committee stage on 18 April, and we have still not heard when the Report stage will be. Can the Leader of the House throw any light on that? Is not the delay due to the Government's embarrassment about their defeats in Committee? Is it not about time that Ministers accepted those amendments, and allowed the Bill to proceed to the statute book? The House is entitled to know what is happening to that Bill.

On a different issue, is the Leader of the House in a position to give us the date, or perhaps dates, of the summer economic debate? I asked him about that also some time ago. Can we have a debate in Government time on the report of the Select Committee on Social Security on housing benefit fraud, which was published yesterday?

I know that such debates are sometimes delayed so that Ministers can make their response to a report, but surely we should discuss this as a priority as today's *The Times* tells us that landlords are cheating the benefit system of more than £2 billion a year. That situation must be of concern to every hon. Member, and we should have the opportunity to debate the matter as urgently and quickly as possible.

Finally, may I ask the Leader of the House about the arrangements for the Euro 96 football competition, which is hosted by Britain and which will start soon after the Whitsun recess? It might be appropriate if, even in advance of the debate on sport on 7 June, we had a statement from Ministers about security arrangements and related matters, such as the implementation of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 with regard to ticket touts.

Is the Leader of the House aware that local authorities have been denied the necessary funds which were promised in order to police the events adequately? Given that the Government expect that the Treasury will receive an extra £8 million in VAT receipts from Euro 96, is it not about time that they gave proper support to ensure the success of this prestigious tournament?

Mr. Newton: The Government have every intention of proceeding with the Family Law Bill in the normal way. As the hon. Lady says, it is only just emerging from Committee, and I expect to provide time for Report in an early future statement.

I do not think that I can add to what I have said before about the Community Care (Direct Payments) Bill. It is right that my right hon. and hon. Friends should carefully

[Mr. Newton]

consider the points that have been made in Committee. They are doing that, and in due course we will bring the Bill back before the House.

The last time the hon. Lady asked me about the summer economic debate, I said that I would give the date as soon as possible. I am not yet in a position to do that, but I hope to be able to do so before too much longer.

As for the Social Security Committee's report on housing benefit fraud, I know of no serious basis for a suggestion of a figure of around £2 billion, but the hon. Lady will be aware that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security has already put in place a comprehensive strategy to tackle fraud. I will, however, bring her remarks to the attention of the appropriate people. Perhaps the Liaison Committee will want to take some of the time that, in effect, belongs to it in order to debate the report, but I think it appropriate—and I would expect the Committee to agree—for the Government to respond first in the usual way.

If I may put in a small barb, I would quite like to hear some explanation of why so many Labour authorities appear to have taken no interest in these matters until they were put under pressure by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security.

The Government are keen to do all that they properly and reasonably can to support the success of Euro 96. As the hon. Lady said, hon. Members will have an opportunity to make points about it during the debate on sport; in the meantime, I shall bring her remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for National Heritage.

Mr. Hugh Dykes (Harrow, East): Some months ago, my right hon. Friend kindly said that he would consider a request from me—and, I think, from others—for a debate on developments in the People's Republic of China, the link with Hong Kong, the change of ownership next year, and related matters. Has he been able to make progress on that, notwithstanding the pressure on the timetable?

Mr. Newton: As was manifest in my statement, I have not been able to make progress on it yet, but I keep the issue very much in mind, also bearing in mind a not dissimilar request from the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Mrs. Taylor).

Sir David Steel (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): Why on earth is the Leader of House allowing the Education (Scotland) Bill to be dealt with on the Floor of the House? Is he aware that the Scottish Grand Committee is currently a travelling roadshow in Scotland? We visit various places, at considerable inconvenience to hon. Members and at great cost to the taxpayer, on the basis that it all shows how accountable Scottish Office Ministers are to the people of Scotland.

Why, when something of substance such as the Education (Scotland) Bill comes up, is it dealt with on the Floor of the House, where the Government will mobilise the votes of English, Welsh and Northern Ireland Members on a Bill that does not affect any of their constituents?

Mr. Newton: I will not pursue the right hon. Gentleman too hard, but I hope that, before pressing that last point too often, he at least—even if we cannot expect it from the Opposition Front Bench—will give us an answer to the West Lothian question.

As for the main thrust of the right hon. Gentleman's question, I understand—and the usual channels have made it clear—that the Bill is thought to involve a degree of controversiality that necessitates a debate on the Floor of the House. If the right hon. Gentleman takes a different view and can persuade the usual channels that the Bill should be dealt with by the Scottish Grand Committee, I will happily consider it.

Mr. Bob Dunn (Dartford): Is it possible for us to have an urgent early debate on the future of grammar schools in Kent, given that the Lib-Lab regime that currently runs county hall in Maidstone has now declared war on the people of that county? It says that our grammar schools, high schools and city technology colleges must go, which directly contradicts the wishes of the people represented by Conservative Members such as me.

Mr. Newton: I hope that my hon. Friend will have an opportunity to raise that subject on a Wednesday morning. It strikes me as an excellent example of the price, in the broadest sense, that so many people are paying for their Lib-Lab or Labour authorities.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Is the Leader of the House aware that, in the run-up to the tourist season, there are real worries about the number of British citizens who are making tours and visits on aeroplanes chartered from third countries, sometimes with non-English-speaking crews? Those planes are landing at British airports and picking up British travellers. It is extremely dangerous, and it is happening increasingly. Will the right hon. Gentleman find time for us to debate the matter before there is a very bad accident involving British citizens?

Mr. Newton: Let me respond in the spirit in which the hon. Lady put her question. I think that the first and best thing for me to do now is to ensure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport studies her remarks carefully.

Mr. Harry Greenway (Ealing, North): May we have a debate on the devolution of control of parking to local authorities, and raise in the House Ealing council's frequent failure to remove vehicles that are not properly taxed and the like, and are disrupting traffic? Meanwhile, the council is issuing thousands more parking tickets than have ever been issued before in Northolt, Greenford, Hanwell, Ealing and everywhere else, to the fury and inconvenience of people who are often not breaking the law.

Mr. Newton: I will also bring that point to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, although I do not expect that he will wish to take control of parking policy throughout the country.

Mr. Norman Hogg (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth): Returning to the subject of the Scottish Grand Committee, the Leader of the House will be aware that the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Scottish Office Front-Bench

team are wandering around Scotland like new age travellers with Committee members and at great expense, as has been pointed out by the right hon. Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Sir D. Steel), the former leader of the Liberal party. Will the Leader of the House include the sittings of the Scottish Grand Committee in his weekly statement of business to the House, so that the House will know just where that Committee is sitting and the consequent expense that goes with that farce?

Mr. Newton: I will consider that practical suggestion, which no doubt was intended to be helpful, although I would not wish my statement to be too much extended. The hon. Gentleman's main point, however, is extraordinary. It is clear that the people of Scotland have found the Scottish Grand Committee's meetings in Scotland a considerable success. They have generated great interest in parliamentary affairs. So far as I can judge from here, this is simply yet another example of Labour Members hating anything that works well.

Mr. Nigel Forman (Carshalton and Wallington): Will my right hon. Friend find time for an early debate on civil service pensions, and especially the problems that are faced by my constituent, Mrs. Jefferies, who had the misfortune to have interrupted service in the civil service and who therefore finds that her rights are reduced when she needs her occupational pension?

Mr. Newton: I will bring that point to the attention of those responsible for the civil service pension scheme. I think that I am right in saying that, in almost any sphere, people who have interrupted service where the pension is salary-related suffer some change in the pension, but I will reflect on what my hon. Friend has said.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North) *rose—*

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Winnick: It is nice to see those on the Front Bench joining in.

In relation to future business, will there be a repeat of what is going to occur tonight, when Tory Members have been told not to vote? Is the reason why they are not going to vote, at least officially, simply because the Tory Government are frightened that any such vote would mean that the Tory party would again be shown to be split from top to bottom on anything connected with the European issue?

Mr. Newton: Perhaps I should say that it is not only those on the Labour Front Bench who are pleased to see the hon. Gentleman returned to us, but—albeit with some trepidation—those on the Government Front Bench and other Conservative Members.

That said, the hon. Gentleman may have missed the exchanges that I had on this last week with the hon. Member for Dewsbury, and I will not to try to add to those. However, during the week, she has made a speech extolling the way in which scrutiny takes place in European Standing Committees A and B, and suggesting the wider extension of those practices of scrutiny: endorsing exactly what I said last week about the merits of doing the detailed scrutiny upstairs and having a general debate downstairs.

Mr. Anthony Coombs (Wyre Forest): May we have a debate on parliamentary procedure so that we can discuss the appalling parliamentary vandalism last Friday, when the uncontroversial Civil Aviation (Amendment) Bill was unnecessarily voted down and delayed? As a result purely of that parliamentary vandalism, the Bill, which gives British courts jurisdiction over criminal acts in foreign airplanes—which could have been used for next month's European championships—will be delayed until 12 July and will therefore not be able to give the protection that the football authorities and others want.

Mr. Newton: My hon. Friend's point will be endorsed by many other hon. Members. What happened last week to that Bill and the one immediately after was singularly unfortunate. I only hope that no difficulties that would otherwise have been avoided arise in consequence during the Euro 96 championships.

Mr. Andrew Faulds (Warley, East) *rose—*

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Faulds: Most grateful—more, more.

When can the House have an opportunity to debate the programme of the Millennium Commission? Does it not appear that the commission has embarked on a series of really very piddling proposals, when what is needed are, both literally and metaphorically, monumental projects?

Mr. Newton: I am not a member of the Millennium Commission, although my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for National Heritage and the Deputy Prime Minister are. What is being brought forward, and what I personally think would be justified, are some very large projects as well as projects in many parts of the country, of which there are a number, so that the millennium is not only confined to one or two places but marked in a way that can be recognised by people throughout the country.

Mr. Jacques Arnold (Gravesham): Could we have a debate next week on early-day motion 894?

[*That this House congratulates Asda on the boost it has given to the British beef industry, facing a continuation of the offensive ban on its exports, by banning foreign beef from its shelves; welcomes the statement from the Asda Chief Executive, Mr. Archie Norman, that 'British beef is the best and safest in the world and our shoppers want to buy it'; and calls on other supermarket chains and food retailers to endorse this conclusion and follow Asda's example.*]

The motion congratulates Asda on its wisdom and good taste in selling only British beef. Would we not be able to contrast that with the grubby opportunism of McDonalds and the irresponsible scaremongering—that in many ways started the scare—of the hon. Member for Peckham (Ms Harman)?

Mr. Newton: I naturally agree with my hon. Friend's remarks about the original scare tactics of those on the Opposition Front Bench, which undoubtedly contributed a

[Mr. Newton]

good deal to the problem. I very much welcome the statement of the chief executive of Asda, which has obviously also been welcomed by people throughout the country.

Mr. Jack Thompson (Wansbeck): Will the Leader of the House consider at the earliest opportunity having a debate on the future of the coal industry?

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Absolutely.

Mr. Thompson: Since privatisation, much concern has been expressed about health and safety and working conditions in the industry and the evolving circumstances because of opencast coal site expansion.

Mr. Skinner: That is right.

Mr. Thompson: The industry's current situation and its future are worthy of a debate.

Mr. Newton: I hear the vigorous support of the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner). I shall, of course, bear the suggestion in mind, and will meanwhile draw the hon. Gentleman's points to the attention of my right hon. Friends the President of the Board of Trade and the Secretary of State for Education and Employment.

Mr. John Marshall (Hendon, South): May I echo the plea of the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Mrs. Taylor) that the date of the summer economic debate be announced quickly? May I suggest that it might last for two days, since many of us would like to point out that the Governor of the Bank of England has said that the Government are on course to meet their inflation target, unemployment is at its lowest for five years, economic growth is more rapid than in other European countries, and we are attracting much more inward investment than other European countries? All those successes would be hit by the double whammy of the national minimum wage and the social chapter.

Mr. Newton: My hon. Friend has made some excellent points in his usual very effective way. I shall certainly look at the possibility of providing sufficient time for him to express them at greater length.

Mr. John Heppell (Nottingham, East): Is the Leader of the House aware of early-day motion 885, which has been signed by 132 Members from all parties?

[*That this House shares the dismay and concern of millions of disabled people and their carers that sections 1, 2 and 3 of the Disabled Persons (Services, Consultation and Representation) Act 1986, 'The Tom Clarke Act', still await implementation; recalls that these sections were redrafted by the Government and received the full support of the Minister for Disabled People and his successor, now the Prime Minister; and calls upon Her Majesty's Government to implement the sections forthwith or to test the will of each House of Parliament by bringing forward legislation to repeal them.*]

The motion it expresses concern about the fact that, 10 years after the House agreed to pass the Disabled Persons (Services, Consultation and Representation) Act 1986, sections 1, 2 and 3 have not been implemented. Does the Leader of the House agree that there is a need for a full debate on the issue?

Mr. Newton: I am not sure whether I agree on the need for a full debate, bearing in mind the amount of time recently that the House has, rightly and to good purpose, devoted to issues concerning disabled people, including the passage of the very important Disability Discrimination Act 1994. The hon. Gentleman might acknowledge that the requirements of the non-implemented sections of the 1986 Act are to a large extent reflected in arrangements for community care, which of course did not exist at the time in the same way.

Mr. David Shaw (Dover): Will my right hon. Friend promise a debate on disclosure in the registers of members' interests in local councils, so that we can discuss Labour Councillor Peter Bradley in Westminster? He fails to disclose the clients Millbank Consultants Ltd., despite earning tens of thousands of pounds in fees for helping to gain planning permissions. Does not new Labour mean new corruption?

Mr. Newton: No doubt there would have been an opportunity to refer to such matters in the debate on Westminster council that took place earlier this week in Opposition time. However, my hon. Friend will understand that I would not think it appropriate to comment from the Dispatch Box on particular cases.

Mr. Winnick: On a point of order, Madam Speaker, concerning the privileges of the House—

Madam Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but we must follow the rules. Points of order come much later.

Mr. Nigel Spearing (Newham, South): On which day next week will the Government table a substantive and therefore amendable motion on the common agricultural policy? As most of the relevant documents are valid for today's debate on the CAP, why was such a motion not tabled for today? Does the Leader of the House agree that tomorrow would be inappropriate?

As Agriculture Ministers are to meet in Brussels next week, would it not be right and proper for such a motion to be tabled early next week, so that it could be amended and voted upon before any decision was made there? Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that, if that does not happen, we shall be in breach of the resolution of the House on the scrutiny of European matters?

Mr. Newton: I expect that the motion will be tabled tomorrow.

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian): A few moments ago, the Leader of the House was rash enough to say that the Scottish Grand Committee was "working" on its perambulations from Dunfermline to Dundee and Inverness and back again. May I put it to him that the Committee will not be able to work until it is in a position to hurt the Government, which would involve allowing it to vote on substantive and controversial motions? How about starting with the Education (Scotland) Bill?

Mr. Newton: As the hon. Gentleman knows, he is raising a question somewhat different from that asked by

the right hon. Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Sir D. Steel). Having asked his question, the hon. Member for East Lothian (Mr. Home Robertson) must first give me an answer to the West Lothian question.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): In the light of the concerns about the Scottish Grand Committee, I hesitate to press the Leader of the House again on whether a decision has been made about meetings of the Northern Ireland Grand Committee. In particular, we would like the opportunity to meet in Belfast, where the newspapers and other media seem to find it difficult to report the debates in the House, such as Monday's helpful economic debate. To put it another way, if the Leader of the House has not discovered the answer to the West Lothian question, can he tell us the answer to the West Belfast question?

Mr. Newton: It is not I but the Opposition who should be expected to answer the West Lothian question, because they are the ones who cause it to be asked. As for the West Belfast question, my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and I are continuing to consider the matter carefully, but no decision has yet been taken.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the prior options reviews currently being carried out into the public sector research establishments? He will be aware that they will affect hundreds of thousands of top-quality scientific jobs, including those at the Royal Greenwich observatories in my constituency, those at the Horticulture Research Institute at Wellesbourne, and many others.

Mr. Newton: Obviously I am aware of the consideration that is taking place, but I cannot at present tell the hon. Lady when it will be completed to the point at which announcements can be made.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley): Now that the Government's document "Tackling Drugs Together" is being widely read as part of the Lord President's initiative on a different track, is there any chance of a full debate on drugs, and education for our young people about drugs?

Mr. Newton: I am genuinely grateful for that suggestion, and will, with more than usual emphasis, bear it in mind. There is no doubt that the new strategy—although a further development took place this week, the strategy in general dates back more than a year—has been widely welcomed throughout the country by both the statutory and the voluntary sectors, as well as by almost everybody else. It is important that we carry that drive forward.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): When can we debate the terrible situation in Irian Jaya? There is certain to be a wholly disproportionate reaction by the Indonesian forces to the two tragic deaths that took place yesterday, but the real problem in West Papua arises from the forced colonisation of the native people by Indonesia, and the wicked exploitation of its mineral wealth by a British company, Rio Tinto Zinc. When can we debate those issues?

Mr. Newton: I cannot give the hon. Gentleman a date for such a debate. I should like to confine my remarks to expressing regret at the deaths that took place there, and—with all hon. Members—pleasure at the successful release of the British hostages.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): How about the Crown Office question? Does the Leader of the House recollect that one of the attractions of and reasons given for the peripatetic Scottish Grand Committee, as outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kilsyth (Mr. Hogg), was that the Lord Advocate and the Crown Office would become in some way accountable to Parliament? In the circumstances of Lockerbie and what has happened in Kent—with those extraordinary findings at the laboratories responsible for the crucial so-called "evidence" on Lockerbie, the work of Dr. Faraday and Dr. Thomas Hayes—would it not be highly desirable that, at Dunfermline on Monday, there should be a statement from the Lord Advocate, and, indeed, that he should answer Question 2 to the Prime Minister on Tuesday?

With respect to the Minister of State, Scottish Office, he may say that he answers the questions—I do not want to be rude to him—but he is a messenger in these matters. The Lord Advocate is the Minister. On Tuesday, the Prime Minister stood at the Dispatch Box and more or less said in answer to my question, "Over to the Lord Advocate." It really flies in the face of accountability that the Minister of State should be a messenger in these affairs, without any detailed knowledge of the background of the issues.

Mr. Newton: Madam Speaker, you will appreciate that I am not in a position to make changes to the procedures between now and next week, and that I cannot give any guarantee of further changes at any time. The hon. Gentleman will have noticed that my hon. Friend the Minister of State is in the Chamber, and that he has heard what the hon. Gentleman said.

Mr. Tony Banks (Newham, North–West): May I draw the attention of the Leader of the House to early-day motion 889?

[*That this House deplores the decision by the Norwegian Fisheries Department to allow the slaughter of 425 Minke Whales plus an unspecified number to be slaughtered in the name of 'scientific' whaling; accuses the Norwegian Government and in particular Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland of rank hypocrisy in parading green credentials whilst at the same time defying both the International Whaling Commission and public opinion throughout Europe; and demands that the Norwegian Government ends the smuggling of whale meat and blubber into Japan and calls off the Minke Whale slaughter due to commence on 21st May.*]

That relates to the Norwegian slaughter of minke whales in the north Atlantic. The Norwegians are due to slaughter about 425 minke whales, plus an unspecified number of them for so-called "scientific whaling", starting on 21 May.

I am sick and tired of Mrs. Gro Harlem Brundtland, the Norwegian Prime Minister—who calls herself a socialist and goes around the world, including to the United Nations, parading her green credentials—flouting the rules and agreements of the International Whaling

[Mr. Tony Banks]

Commission. As the IWC is due to meet in Scotland on 24 June, can we please have a debate in the House, so that the anger of hon. Members on both sides of the House can be clearly demonstrated to the Norwegians? If we cannot have such a debate in the House, how about in the Scottish Grand Committee?

Mr. Newton: I am sure that the suggestion for the work of the Scottish Grand Committee will be borne in mind by those who determine those matters. The hon. Gentleman knows very well that the Government have consistently made clear their very strong opposition to Norway's decision to resume commercial whaling. We very much regret Norway's announcement that it will raise its minke whale quota this year. I can only tell the hon. Gentleman that my hon. Friend the Scottish Office Fisheries Minister will meet his Norwegian opposite number, and that he will make very clear our view on the matter.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): Next week can we have a statement from the Secretary of State for National Heritage on the question of small credit unions' entitlement to receive lottery funding? As the Leader of the House may be aware, there are five small credit unions in Scotland. They are non-profit-making organisations that are on the point of receiving grants from the National Lottery Charities Board. Those grants have been held up because of a legal technicality—some lack of clarity as to their entitlement. I know that the Leader of the House has a good nature. I appeal to his good nature, because I know that it is there. Can this matter be clarified, because those organisations perform a vital function in some of the more socially deprived areas of Scotland?

Mr. Newton: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman, who is sometimes a bit acerbic, has noticed how good natured I am. So I shall smile at him and say: I shall ensure that the Secretary of State for National Heritage knows of his concern.

Mr. Robert Hughes (Aberdeen, North): Is the Minister aware that I received a reply yesterday from the Secretary of State for National Heritage that makes no comment on the problems of the law, saying simply that it is up to the National Lottery Charities Board to determine whether it is legal? The reply went on to state that there are no plans to change the law. Will the Leader of the House use his best endeavours to facilitate a meeting between me and other colleagues who wish to see the Minister to discuss the matter?

Mr. Newton: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman has already made such a request. If not, he has now made it publicly on the Floor of the House, and I am sure that my right hon. Friend will consider it carefully.

Mr. Winnick: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. On numerous occasions, you and your predecessors have pointed out that, while we have privilege in the House, it should be used with the recognition that we should exercise it in a way which is not an abuse. I hope that you agree that it is important that we should continue to have privilege, but that it should not be exercised in a way that leads to abuse.

Do you consider that it is right and proper for the hon. Member for Dover (Mr. Shaw) to make the remarks he did? As the hon. Gentleman has demonstrated time and time again, he is undoubtedly the No. 1 smear merchant in the House of Commons. Is there no way in which we can rectify the way in which he abuses privilege time and time again?

Mr. David Shaw: Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. Conservative Members have had to take a lot of stick from the Opposition. On Tuesday, people—

Madam Speaker: Order. There was a properly ordered debate on Tuesday. If the hon. Gentleman has a point of order for me, I will listen to it. I have something to say and I am ready to say it, so he had better get what he has to say off his chest quickly.

Mr. Shaw: I am grateful, Madam Speaker. On Tuesday, certain Westminster Conservative councillors were called serial killers by Labour Members in the House. I have raised factual information that anyone can see in the register of companies at Companies house. That information points the finger at a Labour councillor. It is disgraceful that Labour Members are not prepared to have a situation pointed out to them, and want to cover up corruption. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. Far too many Members of this House too eagerly make accusations and allegations against each other and against persons outside the House, and do so under the cloak of privilege. I deprecate the way in which they use that privilege without tempering it with responsibility. I have said so before, and I hope that those Members, who are well known to me, will take to heart what I have said, and that we shall have better conduct of debate that deals with policy matters rather than personalities.

BILL PRESENTED

Stalking (Scotland)

Mr. John McFall, supported by Mrs. Helen Liddell, Mrs. Irene Adams, Mrs. Maria Fyfe, Ms Rachel Squire, Mr. John McAllion, Mr. Gordon McMaster, Mr. William McKelvey, Mr. Ernie Ross, Mr. Malcolm Chisholm and Mr. Eric Clarke, presented a Bill to make provision in relation to Scotland for a new criminal offence of stalking and for a prohibitory order with sanctions against stalking; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon 12 July and to be printed. [Bill 133.]

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 101(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

Social Security

That the Social Security (Claims and Payments Etc.) Amendment Regulations 1996 (S.I., 1996, No. 672) be referred to a Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation.—*[Mr. McLoughlin.]*

Question agreed to.

Common Agricultural Policy

[Relevant documents: The Fourteenth and Eighteenth Reports of the Select Committee on European Legislation, Session 1995-96 (House of Commons Paper No. 51-xiv and House of Commons Paper No. 51-xviii); European Community Document No. 5215/96, relating to agricultural prices for 1996-97; the unnumbered Explanatory Memorandum submitted by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on 3rd May 1996 relating to supplementary premium payable to sheep producers in non-Less Favoured Areas of Ireland and the United Kingdom in respect of Northern Ireland; the report by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the Scottish Office Agriculture, Environment and Fisheries Department, the Northern Ireland Department for Agriculture and the Welsh Office on Agriculture in the United Kingdom 1995; European Community Documents Nos. 7015/95, relating to agrimonetary reform; 9061/95, relating to agrimonetary compensation; national aids; 9270/95, relating to controls in the wine sector 1992-94; 10479/95, the Court of Auditors' special report on the sheep and goat régime; 11896/95, the financial report of the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund Guarantee Section for 1994; 12476/95, relating to agrimonetary compensation; and 4322/96, the Court of Auditors' special report on agricultural expenditure in Portugal 1988-93.]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. McLoughlin.]*

Madam Speaker: I have had to place a 10-minute limit on all Back-Bench speeches.

4.7 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Tony Baldry): This is the second day of the agriculture debate, in which the primary concern has related to the lifting of the export ban. As hon. Members will know, the standing veterinary committee examined yesterday the Community ban on exports of gelatine, tallow and semen. Naturally, we wanted to see the ban lifted there and then. That was not to be, but we have made considerable progress. In presenting its proposal, the Commission made it clear that it recognises the strength of our scientific case. A substantial number of member states rallied to our proposal. I was particularly pleased that we secured the support of the French. We should all be grateful for the personal interest taken by President Chirac in the matter. Our relentless negotiating is bearing fruit.

In opening the debate yesterday, my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food made it clear that yesterday's SVC was not a make-or-break event. The committee is to reconvene on Monday morning. We shall continue to press our case hard between now and then. Commissioner Fischler is reported in today's *Financial Times* as being optimistic that we shall achieve a positive outcome. I share his optimism. We shall then see real progress towards lifting the ban, which we have always held to be unjustified and disproportionate.

There has been some confusion about the standing veterinary committee's procedures, which has led, in my view, to some commentators being more pessimistic than they need be about yesterday's outcome. Let me take a moment to try to explain. The ideal outcome, of course, is that the committee accepts the Commission's proposal by a qualified majority. The proposal therefore will be adopted. If it does not, it is not the end of the road. In that case, the procedures provide that the Commission shall, without delay, submit a proposal to the Council. In that context, I should point out that next Monday's standing veterinary committee meeting will be followed immediately by the Agriculture Council. Unless a simple majority of the Council votes against the measure, it can be implemented by the Commission within two weeks. We are starting to see real progress in lifting the ban.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): Is not the Commission satisfied that everything that needs to be done to have this part of the ban lifted has been done? At Prime Minister's Question Time this afternoon, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was asked by the Leader of the Opposition whether he thought that everything that needed to be done was being done. Did my hon. Friend notice that no additional action was suggested either by the Leader of the Opposition or by the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown), the leader of the Liberal Democrats? Is it not time for the House to speak with one voice in support of British agriculture, the British beef industry and the measures that my hon. Friend and my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister of Agriculture are taking?

Mr. Baldry: It is noticeable that no scintilla of a suggestion has come from either Labour or the Liberal Democrats of any action that we should take that we are not already taking. We have seen this week some negative criticism and the Opposition playing at party politics, but we have not heard a single positive or constructive suggestion. Indeed, it is pleasant to see some Labour Members present today. On Monday, the House had a debate on the 30-month scheme without a single Labour Back Bencher being present at any time.

It may be helpful if I update the House on the progress of the 30-month cull.

Mr. Graham Riddick (Colne Valley): If we believe that the worldwide ban on the export of British beef is illegal, should we not just ignore it? What steps are the Government taking to have the ban lifted in individual, non-EU countries and to promote the sale of British beef in countries outside the EU?

Mr. Baldry: My hon. Friend, who has a considerable constituency interest in the matter, has made that point on a number of previous occasions, and I say to him now what I said to him then. The EU ban is not the only one with which we have to contend. For some time, countries such as the United States and Canada have been banning British beef. To ensure that the worldwide ban is lifted, it is essential that the Community ban—which is clearly unjustified and disproportionate—be removed as speedily as possible. I believe that we are making real progress towards lifting the ban.

Mr. John Townend (Bridlington): First, are there orders from third countries waiting to be exported that are being prevented from leaving this country because of the EU ban? Secondly, we accept that the vast majority—if not all—of the cows that will be killed are not infected. Originally, the Government proposed not to destroy the meat, but to bone it out. There are hundreds of thousands of starving people in the world. Has any consideration been given to making the meat available to them at no charge or at a very small charge?

Mr. Baldry: The answer to my hon. Friend's first question is no. On the second question, it is important

[Mr. Baldry]

to remember the genesis of the 30-month scheme. The Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee recommended on 24 March that all beef over 30 months should be deboned. It was as a consequence of that statement that retailers soon told meat merchants and their farmer suppliers that they were no longer prepared to take beef over 30 months. Farmers were understandably concerned that they no longer had a market for such beef. Retailers wanted to be confident that the only beef in the food chain was younger than 30 months and farmers were keen to get some compensation because they no longer had a market for their older beef.

That is why we introduced the 30-month cull scheme. Retailers and others would be concerned if there were a scintilla of a suggestion that any of the meat involved in the 30-month cull could get back into the human food chain. We are ensuring that none of it will.

Mr. Anthony Coombs (Wyre Forest): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Baldry: I must make some progress.

The House will recall that I explained at length on Monday the progress that we have made on the scheme and the logistical challenges that we faced, not least with rendering capacity. I told the House that the advice from the rendering industry is that the maximum rendering capacity that it could spare could deal with about 18,000 cattle a week in England and Wales, and 25,000 throughout the UK.

I notice that today's *The Independent* questions those figures, but I have had further written confirmation that they are correct. The chairman of the United Kingdom Renderers Association says:

"I can assure you all plants are this week on full production."

I hope to increase that figure substantially, as I am able to bring on stream further cold storage so that only the parts of animals that immediately need to be rendered are rendered while the rest goes into cold storage to be rendered later.

Mr. Andrew Welsh (Angus, East): Is there a test for contaminated foodstuffs, and will the brains of slaughtered cattle be tested to provide hard evidence of the pathology of the disease? That is essential to any policy and to customer confidence. I asked the Under-Secretary of State for Wales those questions last night and he said that the Minister would answer them. Will he answer those straightforward questions now?

Mr. Baldry: Every animal aged over 30 months will be slaughtered. Having been slaughtered, those animals will be rendered. Having been rendered, the specified bovine offal will be dyed blue and the rest will be dyed yellow, so that there is no chance of that material getting back into the human food chain. In due course, it will all be incinerated. If SEAC or others feel that it would help their research to carry out tests on any part of those animals, we shall of course help. The hon. Gentleman must recognise that this is a huge logistical exercise and that we must ensure that the cattle are culled and disposed of properly as speedily as possible.

As of today, just under 20,000 animals have been slaughtered under the scheme. Today's estimated slaughter figure is 4,220. We are very nearly on track to meet this week's planned slaughter rate. Given the rendering plants' working capacity, the best that we could have done this week would be 25,000. We are near that target.

I am committed, however, to doing all that I can to ensure that the backlog is cleared as speedily as possible and that farmers are given as much help as possible. The first of the extra cold storage comes on line this coming Tuesday and, during the next three weeks, I hope to bring on line a further 27,500 tonnes of cold storage, which I estimate will enable the weekly kill to be increased progressively over the next three weeks, from 18,000 to 24,000 in England and Wales. A similar, proportionate capacity is being identified and commissioned in Scotland and Northern Ireland. So, we are entirely on target to meet the throughput that I envisaged when I wrote to every colleague last Friday.

As a consequence of identifying, commissioning and bringing on stream substantial cold storage capacity, we can almost double the number of abattoirs taking part in the scheme. I wrote to all hon. Members yesterday, listing the abattoirs that we intend to use for the scheme. In England and Wales, that should enable us shortly to reach a weekly slaughter rate of 24,000.

Late yesterday, the House will no doubt have noticed that a number of retailers said that, for reasons purely of perception—they made that clear—they would prefer not to source meat for their stores from abattoirs taking part in the 30-month cull programme. That is regrettable. After all, as I explained to the House, that scheme was in large part a consequence of an agreement between farmers and retailers, enabling retailers to have the confidence that they would be taking only younger beef into their stores and farmers to know that they would have the means of being paid for any animals over 30 months, following SEAC's recommendations. At a time when we are trying to convince others in Europe to follow best science, it is disappointing that retailers are not following the best scientific advice. There seems to be no substantive disagreement about the fact that there is no scientific or hygiene reason why slaughtering should not take place for the cull programme on different days, given all the various regulatory and statutory controls in abattoirs that are participating in the scheme.

I am, however, determined that the actions of the retailers will not impede the progress of the scheme. Today, we have been in touch with every abattoir that had said that it wished to take part. A handful are considering their position. I am glad to say that the overwhelming majority want to continue to cull under the 30-month programme, and I am confident that any shortfall in the slaughtering capacity can immediately be made up by a combination of increasing the number of cattle that other abattoirs on the list are able to slaughter and taking on a number of further abattoirs that are prepared to participate in the scheme.

In the coming week, I can see no reason why we should not maintain our England and Wales target of slaughtering 18,000, building up to a rate of 24,000 a week in the near future.

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay) *rose—*

Mr. Anthony Coombs *rose—*

Mr. Baldry: I shall gladly give way to both my hon. Friends when I have explained the total picture to the House.

I have also examined the potential for incineration. Some incineration capacity will be required to deal with fallen stock, and I explained the details of that to the House on Monday. All vets will shortly have a list of abattoirs and incineration plants to which they can send fallen stock, but I am determined to explore all possible options for using existing incinerators for the scheme. Part of the difficulty is that many of the incinerators are small and it is impossible for them to take carcases unless they have been partially or fully rendered, which is the general bottleneck on the scheme. If it is possible to identify incinerators that can take animals slaughtered under the scheme without their needing to be rendered, the House can rest assured that I shall endeavour to commission them without delay.

As from Monday, I shall use all the registered bovine spongiform encephalopathy incinerators for dealing with emergency slaughtered cattle on farms. Once the casualty backlog is cleared, I shall use all those incinerators to enhance our total throughput from abattoirs in England and Wales.

Mr. Coombs: First, I congratulate my hon. Friend on the cull scheme. He has a real grip on that—that is generally perceived, especially on the Conservative Benches. To take him back to beef export licences and the Government's exact position on them, if there were orders from abroad for prime British beef—perhaps not a very hypothetical circumstance—which we all know to be safe and which has been banned illegally by countries throughout the world, according to the British Government, can my hon. Friend give an assurance that anyone applying for a licence to fulfil those orders would not be stopped by the Government on the ground that that was illegal?

Mr. Baldry: Our difficulty is not with orders—I know of no orders or potential orders from third countries. Our difficulty is with third countries returning to this country beef that has been on the high seas, and the considerable losses being suffered by exporters in this country. We must all bend every effort to getting the ban lifted as soon as possible, so that we may start to export throughout the world.

Mr. Riddick: Answer the question.

Mr. John Townend: Answer the question.

Mrs. Gorman: Is my hon. Friend aware of the latest scientific evidence that has come from Oxford university zoological department, which shows, among other things, that we are killing 33 healthy animals for every one that might possibly have the disease, and that moreover, we are killing animals that we do not need to destroy? It shows that the target group should be animals of five, six and seven years old, not animals below five years, which are almost 100 per cent. assuredly safe. Should we reconsider the slaughtering policy?

Mr. Baldry: Two of my hon. Friends felt that I did not fully answer the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mr. Coombs). I am sorry about that. Although it has not happened yet, if someone comes knocking on my door to say that he has an order from a third market, of course we shall consider that. At present, the only people knocking on my door are exporters, telling me that they are having meat returned from overseas and asking whether they will be compensated. If my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest finds some third markets, of course we shall consider that.

I shall now deal with the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman).

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow) *rose—*

Mr. Baldry: I am seeking to deal with one intervention at a time. May I deal with the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay first?

At present, there is only one cull scheme, and it did not have its origins in a Government measure. As I explained to the House, it had its origins in a joint approach by retailers and farmers to the Government.

As part of the measures to restore confidence in UK beef, retailers wanted to ensure that only beef under 30 months was on their shelves—no older beef. Farmers were concerned because, as a consequence of the SEAC recommendation that all beef over 30 months be deboned, retailers were no longer prepared to take beef over 30 months, so farmers no longer had any market for it and they wished to find a system of compensation for that beef.

That is why we introduced the 30-month cull programme. It was suggested to us by farmers and retailers as part of the measures to help restore confidence in British beef and to help British producers, and that is what we are doing.

I hope, however, that no one in the House underestimates the logistical scale of that exercise. To maximise the slaughtering and rendering capacity, it will soon be necessary for every slaughterhouse taking part to send a sizeable proportion of every animal killed straight away to be rendered while the rest goes into cold storage.

To assist in ensuring that we have the best possible transport and other logistics, so that the transport operation is as smooth and efficient as possible, the chief executive of the intervention board is today meeting staff at the Royal Logistic Corps to obtain their independent overview of the logistics of the disposal operation.

I am sure that hon. Members will appreciate that we are talking about handling very many cattle and very large quantities of rendering material, all in a short period, and I am very glad that the intervention board is able to draw on the best available advice from the RLC and others, to ensure that we maximise the potential of abattoirs and renderers.

Mr. Gill: I wanted to intervene when my hon. Friend was talking about casualty and fallen stock. I should like to hear him reassure the House that he understands the arithmetic of that exercise. If the arithmetic is not right, farmers will bury stock on their land, and the consequences could be very serious indeed and might be a public relations disaster. Will the Minister give hon. Members an assurance that he will consider the request for assistance from the Licensed Animal Slaughterers and Salvage Association, to ensure that farmers have an incentive to remove animals from their farms and do not bury them there?

Mr. Baldry: As hon. Members will be aware, I have been meeting a large number of representatives of the

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National Farmers Union, the Country Landowners Association, renderers, abattoir owners and others on a daily basis. In addition, I have been meeting representatives of veterinary bodies, including the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons and the British Veterinary Association.

Hon. Members can rest assured that the proposals that I have put in place for casualty slaughter command the support of the veterinary bodies. Any farmer who has a casualty animal knows—and every vet will soon have the information—that the abattoirs taking part in the scheme have undertaken to have a commonsense approach to dealing with fallen stock and stock that may need to be killed on farms.

However, some abattoirs cannot physically manage stock that is already dead. Therefore, a significant number of incinerator plants will act as collection points for such stock—they will be registered. During the debate on Monday, I made it clear that farmers will continue to be compensated under the scheme if the fallen stock goes to an incinerator—incinerators will act as collection points for the purpose of the exercise. Farmers should not have to bury stock on their farm. Farmers should be able to deal with their vets and others to ensure that casualty stock is moved to an abattoir or to a renderer.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): I refer the Minister to the important point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Angus, East (Mr. Welsh)—that is, why will there be no tests on the brains of animals that are slaughtered under the 30-month scheme? Surely such a test would give vital information about the concentration of the disease and provide critical hard evidence to guide an eradication or selective slaughter policy. I represent a beef constituency and my farmers believe that this disease must be faced and defeated—there is no percentage in any cover-up.

Mr. Baldry: Anyone would resent any scintilla of a suggestion of a cover-up. Throughout all this, we have been keen—and we are keen—that all knowledge, research and information about BSE is made readily available and shared. This is a dreadful problem that faces all of us, particularly producers. I made the point to the hon. Member for Angus, East (Mr. Welsh) that if SEAC or any of the veterinary bodies come forward and say that they would like to carry out tests on parts of the animals that are slaughtered under the 30-month scheme, facilities could be made available.

The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) has to have some regard to the logistics of the scheme. If the programme is slowed down because we have to incorporate a system of taking tests from every animal slaughtered into what are already complicated logistics, there will be considerable resentment in his constituency and in the constituencies of many other hon. Members.

In addition to the help being given by the Royal Logistic Corps, the Ministry of Defence is being helpful and it is making sites available to renderers for the relief storage of meat and bone meal derived under the scheme. The sites will be brought on stream as required and they will be managed by the intervention board. The rendered meat and bone meal will go to those sites prior to being finally disposed of—that is, incinerated.

I am very conscious that, however many abattoirs we use and however efficiently I utilise the finite rendering and incineration capacity that is available to me, not every animal can be culled today or tomorrow. I fully recognise that many farmers—particularly those with clean beef—are in difficult financial circumstances. That is why I want to ensure that farmers are paid under the scheme as speedily as possible. We have introduced a substantial top-up for those with heifers and steers because we recognise that money must get to the farmers quickly.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): I return the Minister to the allegation of a cover-up. The document entitled "Agriculture in the United Kingdom 1995" refers to the unannounced visits made to abattoirs and says that specified bovine offals were not removed properly in only a few rare cases. However, in his answers to parliamentary questions, the Minister said that in September last year 48 per cent. of slaughterhouses that were visited were not handling the SBOs properly. How does that information square with the claims in the document?

Mr. Baldry: If the hon. Gentleman looks more carefully at the parliamentary answer that was given to the second part of his question, he will see that the 48 per cent. figure does not refer specifically to the removal of specified bovine offals. It relates to a number of infringements, some of which were fairly minor and connected with paperwork.

It is clear beyond peradventure that we have come down hard on any abattoir where there has been an infringement. We must ensure that standards are enforced rigorously and properly: that is why we have a Meat Hygiene Service. We have made it perfectly clear that any abattoir that fails to meet the necessary standards will be prosecuted. As to the 30-month cull programme, I have made it clear that, if there is any suggestion or suspicion that an abattoir or collection centre is not complying with the regulations or fulfilling the spirit of the scheme, it will be suspended from the scheme.

Mr. Peter Hardy (Wentworth): The Minister refers to meat hygiene regulations, and earlier he mentioned destroying meat that could be a risk to public health. Does he accept that much of the problem is the result of inadequate regulation in the 1980s? Those regulations continue to be inadequate, because poultrymeat that may be a risk to health is not stained and destroyed and can enter the food chain more easily than mammalian meat. In view of its experience in the past seven weeks, will the Ministry reconsider safeguarding the public by staining poultrymeat that is at risk?

Mr. Baldry: In recent weeks, the debate has been bedevilled by attempts to sort out the substantive issues that we must address from the somewhat alarmist suggestions regarding further action, which have no scientific or other proper basis. Ministers must act on the basis of the best advice that we are given. The best advice that we have received from the Meat Hygiene Service is that all that needs to be done in relation to poultry feed is being done. Unless and until such time as anyone gives a substantive reason why that advice is incorrect, it is alarmist to suggest that we are not doing all that we should. We must try to achieve a proper sense of proportion.

Mr. Nick Ainger (Pembroke): The Minister referred earlier to the top-up scheme, which I understand will be in place only until 15 June. Will he assure the House today that the scheme will be extended? Even if 24,000 head of cattle can be culled each week, it will take a long time to get rid of the backlog—which I believe now stands at between 400,000 and 500,000 head. Therefore, the top-up scheme should be extended quite significantly.

Mr. Baldry: I could tease the hon. Gentleman and say that if he had been here for Monday evening's debate, he would have heard me deal with that point at some length. I made it clear on Monday and in a letter that I have sent to every colleague that the 25p top-up will apply to every relevant animal that was on farms on 20 March, so farmers need not be concerned—if they have not had clean heifers and steers immediately slaughtered—that they will lose out on the 25p live weight and 50p dead weight premium. They will not, and it will carry on so long as there is any stock on farms from 20 March.

The date of 15 June is relevant only because we shall then consider not only stock that was on the farms on 20 March, but all stock, to decide the appropriate level for the top-up. As the hon. Gentleman will remember, that top-up will continue generally for a further six months. Anyone who had relevant stock on farms on 20 March will get the top-up irrespective of when the stock comes to be slaughtered. I hope that that has reassured the hon. Gentleman.

Some of the exchanges that we have had already in the House this afternoon demonstrate that there has been some confusion about culling and slaughtering policy. I hope that I have made it clear that, at present, the only culling policy is the one that came forward to the Government at the request and behest of the retail and farming interests.

Much alarmist nonsense has been said, especially by Opposition Members, about a wholesale slaughter policy. In particular, the hon. Members for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes) and for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) both said yesterday that my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister of Agriculture had advocated a scheme involving the mass slaughter of 4 million animals. That is simply not true. I have the transcript of what my right hon. and learned Friend said in the interview to which the hon. Members referred. Asked by John Humphries whether we were considering slaughtering all older cattle, my right hon. and learned Friend simply said that a slaughter policy could not be excluded. It could not be excluded at that time because we did not have the SEAC recommendations. Asked whether we might slaughter all the animals that had been infected, my right hon. and learned Friend simply said that that was another option. Indeed, far from talking of a mass slaughter programme, my right hon. and learned Friend clearly hinted that we were working up plans for removing from the food chain all animals over 30 months. That, of course, is precisely the policy that we have since pursued.

Mr. David Nicholson (Taunton): The House will greatly welcome the fact that my hon. Friend has made that point clear. Now that it is clear that the British consumer has substantially regained confidence in British beef—and that is helped by the excellent decision by Asda, which was announced yesterday and is the subject of an early-day motion that I have tabled—will my hon. Friend bear in mind supply and demand in the medium term? It is feared that in a year's time we might run short of beef supply. It is also suggested, especially if we yield to pressure from abroad for a more substantial cull, that our dairy industry might face difficulty. In my constituency, it has been suggested that, in those circumstances, we might have to import UHT milk in the autumn.

Mr. Baldry: My hon. Friend has made some important points. All the work that we have done on the impact on the dairy industry demonstrates that there will probably be about a 1 per cent. reduction in milk production in the short and medium term. That is about the equivalent of the super-levy that we had to pay this year. My hon. Friend is right, and we are considering the medium and longer-term consequences of everything that is happening to every sector of the industry. I shall say more about the impact on prices and the help that we can give beef producers with cattle under 30 months.

The debate involves not only our immediate concerns about the beef industry following SEAC's announcement, but several issues connected with this year's common agricultural price fixing.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): What is the latest position on the slower maturing breeds, in particular Highland cattle? Has any decision been made or any flexibility given?

Mr. Baldry: As I said to the hon. Gentleman in an earlier exchange, my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food issued a consultation paper a little while ago, after she had had extensive discussions with the industry and the various breed representatives. Thus the consultation paper was clearly based on informed discussion. The period for that consultation closes tomorrow and, as I hope anyone reading the consultation paper will recognise, we intend to seek exemptions for the slower maturing breeds, many of which are excellent breeds such as Highland and Dexter cattle. I hope that any hon. Members who have not made representations or responded to the consultation paper will do so, and will draw their constituents' attention to it immediately, because the consultation period closes tomorrow.

In February, the European Commission presented its proposals on farm prices for 1996-97 and related measures, and they were first discussed in that month's Agriculture Council. Since then, there has been a further Council discussion in April and the proposals are on the agenda for May. It is likely that agreement will be reached in June.

I am sorry to say that the Commission's proposals are, as in recent years, extremely limited in scope. The Commission justifies that approach by drawing attention to the need for continuity and stability and pointing out that there is little need for more radical proposals at a time when the final transition year of the 1992 reform has not yet ended.

The Government agree that the CAP needs to change if the challenges identified by the Commission are to be effectively addressed. I believe strongly that the opportunity presented by the 1996 price proposals—to

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make a start on the path of bringing CAP support prices down towards a more sustainable level—has been missed by the Commission. The fact that market prices are relatively high in many sectors should make such a change acceptable to farmers. Against that background, the 1996 price fixing negotiations provide an ideal opportunity to define the future direction of the CAP and to give farmers a clear signal on how it is expected to evolve during the coming years.

The Commission has made some useful moves. We welcome its undertaking to come forward with its proposals for the 1997 set-aside rate in good time, so that there is a chance that that can be agreed in July. That will allow farmers to make their planning decisions at an early stage. I welcome the Commission's assurances that the proposals this year will respect the budget guidelines in 1996 and 1997.

This year's price fixing proposals must of course have regard to BSE and the crisis in the beef industry. As a result of the crisis, the Agriculture Council has already agreed a number of market-related measures. However, it is clear that in respect of this price fixing negotiation, the Commission will have to come forward with a revised set of proposals on beef if agreement is to be reached.

I shall give some detail about beef intervention and then deal briefly with some of the detail of the specific commodities of this year's price fixing. I am very anxious that during the present difficulties we do all that we can to assist beef producers with under-30-month animals who are experiencing difficult markets and difficulty selling their cattle.

Of course, the best way to maintain the beef industry is to ensure a return of consumer confidence, both here and abroad. Domestically, we are well on the way to achieving that objective: demand is recovering; beef consumption—according to the Meat and Livestock Commission—is approaching near normal levels; and consumers and retailers are returning to British beef in the knowledge that it is of the highest quality and can be eaten with confidence.

The latest weekly data on retail sales of fresh and frozen beef, which were released on 13 May, show that the volume of sales last week was back to 94 per cent. of the comparable 1995 level. We have clear evidence of that in the decision taken by one of the major burger chains to source beef from Britain. That is a most welcome development and I hope that others follow suit.

Equally welcome was yesterday's announcement by the chairman of a major multiple retailer to source all its beef from this country. I can think of no better endorsement. However, I understand from industry sources that the market in catering and processed beef producer sales remains difficult. The difficult nature of the overall beef market is reflected in sales of cattle by farmers. Data from the MLC show that the number of prime cattle sold into the food chain has gradually recovered in recent weeks, but it is still below pre-BSE levels. The average market price is around 17 per cent. lower than this time last year.

I acknowledge that regaining consumer confidence in British beef abroad will be less easy. That will be a longer-term exercise and one which depends to a large extent upon the lifting of the export ban. Nevertheless, we are preparing the way by our efforts to reassure consumers abroad—not just through those countries' Administrations, but directly—that British beef is not only a quality product but a safe one.

Of course, the industry faces a major problem now. I well understand that. That is why the Government have taken rapid action to provide relief at critical points, to preserve links in the chain that are essential to the survival of a healthy British beef industry.

Mr. Mark Robinson (Somerton and Frome): I am reassured by what my hon. Friend says about what he is considering for animals aged just under 30 months. That is of particular concern to the small farmer, often with only four, five or six animals, who has suffered greatly from the fall in prices in recent weeks, and several of whom I have had on the telephone recently. Therefore, I hope that my hon. Friend can consider the matter with reasonable urgency.

Mr. Baldry: Absolutely. My hon. Friend will know, because he was present, certainly at one of the meetings that I attended, that both Parliamentary Secretaries and myself met most or a large number of the farmers who came here yesterday representing NFU branches from all over the country. They strongly reinforced their concerns about the effectiveness of intervention market support measures—a point that we have heard when we have talked to farmers in recent days.

I am pleased that the Commission recognises the particular difficulties that we face and that the adjudication of last week's tender was arranged in such a way that all UK offers that met the appropriate price levels were accepted, whereas all other member states had their offers scaled back by 40 per cent. We have now accepted more than 9,000 tonnes of beef into intervention in the UK.

The Commission is anxious that traders in other member states should resort to exports to relieve market pressure and thus reduce the need for intervention. That course is obviously not currently open to us—would that it were so—so we are discussing with the Commission the need to ensure that the extent of intervention coverage currently available to the UK is continued until such time as the need arises.

I am also aware of the criticisms of the intervention buying procedures. Of course, we have to be mindful of the need to ensure that there are controls to guard against fraud, but my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has asked the intervention board to consider as a matter of urgency what can be done to improve the efficiency of the intervention arrangements, to see whether they can be made more user friendly. My right hon. and learned Friend the Minister of Agriculture will also be taking up with the Council next week the need for an increase in the abattoir processing margin.

I am also pleased that at next week's Agriculture Council, the Commission will be outlining measures to assist beef producers affected by recent market turbulence, and seeking guidance on how and where the additional support should be targeted. That could include proposals to supplement the 1995 suckler cow and beef special premiums, which we shall support because we are determined to explore all possible ways of assisting producers with clean beef aged under 30 months. My hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome

(Mr. Robinson) made a pertinent point. Colleagues on both sides of the House with beef producers who have stock aged under 30 months know that they are in some difficulties, and we wish to help them.

I want now to look briefly at a couple of other sectors that are part of this year's price fixing. In the cereals sector, the Commission's price proposals are disappointing because they miss an ideal opportunity to begin the process of evolutionary reform of the CAP—a process which the Commission itself has said is necessary. We welcome the Commission's proposal for a unified rate of set-aside. That should benefit both farmers and those who have to administer the rules.

As to the rate of set-aside for next year, the Commission has yet to make a proposal, but given the relatively tight market for the main cereals, the rate will need to be reduced from the present 10 per cent. If the Commission and the Council were able to agree on a significant reduction in arable area aid, as the UK has argued and as the market outlook suggests, set-aside as a supply control measure might not be necessary next year. But if there is no such agreement, some set-aside is likely to remain necessary to control production, respect general agreement on tariffs and trade obligations and restrain budgetary costs, albeit at a rate lower than the present 10 per cent. As I think was made clear yesterday, we are also approaching the Commission to see whether set-aside land could be used earlier this year, to help relax the pressure for forage for livestock producers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Taunton (Mr. Nicholson) referred to the dairy industry, which is an important sector. We have consistently argued that quotas hinder the development and rationalisation of the dairy industry and that they have a disproportionate adverse effect in countries such as ours, which have the climatic conditions and infrastructure for efficient milk production.

This year, we are looking for a cut in support prices and an increase in quota. We are disappointed that the Commission has not taken the opportunity in this year's price fixing to make proposals in the dairy sector that would begin the process of reform. It has chosen to do nothing on support prices or quota levels, and we see that as a missed opportunity. Our approach of a cut in support prices and an increase in quota has the considerable advantage that it is good news for producers and consumers alike.

We appear to be making real progress on the reform of the fruit and vegetable regime, which will reduce market withdrawals and move the sector even closer to the market. Given the quality and flavour of UK produce, which is second to none, our growers are well placed to take advantage of those developments. I am glad to say that the industry continues to innovate with new products in order to help stimulate demand. We want to ensure that the reform of the fruit and vegetable regime enables the UK industry to develop its strengths. It is an area in which we have considerable expertise. It is essential that there are CAP regimes that enable us to maximise our competitive advantage.

All the price fixing proposals have to be seen against the background of the Commission's paper entitled "Agriculture Strategy", presented to the Madrid European Council. That paper concludes that the CAP must change because the status quo is

"an impasse and an illusion."

It envisages a developmental approach to market-oriented reform rather than a radical and immediate removal of all production-related support.

The current CAP has few supporters in Britain. It rightly attracts much criticism; it costs taxpayers a great deal of money; it raises food prices for consumers, albeit not by as much as is sometimes claimed; it is vulnerable to fraud; and it imposes a number of bureaucratic restrictions and controls on farmers that increasingly limit their initiative. It disadvantages both our farming industry and the food industry that relies on its products.

For those reasons, we have long pressed for reform of the CAP, on which there is much cross-party agreement. There has been some progress. First, largely because of UK pressure, a ceiling on CAP spending has been in place since 1988, and only unanimity can alter it. That single change has helped the proportion of the EU's budget that is spent on agriculture to fall from nearly 70 per cent. in the late 1980s to 50 per cent. now.

Mr. William Cash (Stafford): In the light of my hon. Friend's extremely encouraging remarks about reform of the CAP, does he agree that, complementary to enlargement, which is at the heart of the intergovernmental conference, is the question of the CAP? How can we put so much emphasis on enlargement on the one hand and not put the whole question of the CAP on the IGC agenda as well? Will my hon. Friend do that, irrespective of paragraph 12 of the White Paper, which says that we shall not discuss matters which, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister of Agriculture said yesterday, would be likely to attract opposition from the other member states? Should not we be arguing efficiently and determinedly? Putting those matters on the IGC's agenda would be a way to ensure that we had a proper discussion and debate.

Mr. Baldry: My hon. Friend can rest assured that every Minister takes every opportunity to argue for reform of the CAP. The House will know, I think, that we consider that reform is inevitable, given the next round of World Trade Organisation talks in 1999 and the enlargement to which my hon. Friend referred. The present CAP cannot possibly survive if other countries join the European Union: it would bankrupt them, and it would bankrupt us.

We take every opportunity to explain the need for reform to Community colleagues. We all now live in a global economy, and if we are not careful, European Community agriculture as a whole will fall behind as a result of the constraints imposed by the CAP. The sooner our colleagues appreciate that, the better. We do not need the IGC to tell them, however; we tell them all the time, whenever we meet them.

As I said, the changes that we brought about helped to reduce the proportion of the EU budget spent on agriculture, from 70 per cent. in the late 1980s to 50 per cent. now. Secondly, in 1992, CAP reforms dramatically reduced cereal and support prices. Those changes have contributed to the almost complete elimination of the food mountains of the past. Stocks of cereals in the Community totalled nearly 32 million tonnes two years ago; the total last month was under 5 million.

Thirdly, and most important for the future, we played a major part in ensuring the success of the Uruguay round of negotiations, which included a far-reaching agreement

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on agriculture. That agreement set world agricultural trade on a liberalising course. We have also taken the lead in combating fraud. In short, the United Kingdom is leading the debate in Europe on CAP reform. [*Laughter.*] I do not know why that should meet with derision from Opposition Members. No other member state in the Community has persistently and consistently taken the lead in reforming the CAP. Every major reform to date has been at our initiative, and it was largely as a result of our drive for reform that the Commission produced a paper at the Madrid summit recognising that the policy must change.

No other member state has been more at the forefront of reform. Our overriding objective is to ensure an efficient, prosperous, competitive and outward-looking agriculture industry that can operate and compete in increasingly open world markets, providing high-quality raw materials at competitive prices and paying due regard to the environment.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Baldry: No.

I hope that, during our two-day debate, the House will recognise that the Government are not only working relentlessly to secure the lifting of the export ban as speedily as possible and to ensure that the 30-month cull is carried out as efficiently as possible, but, in every other aspect of agriculture and horticulture, working in the best interests of United Kingdom producers and consumers alike, to make certain that we have a profitable and competitive industry that can challenge the rest of the world now and well into the next century.

5.3 pm

Mrs. Helen Liddell (Monklands, East): It is unfortunate that, in his peroration, the Minister spoke of the relentless quest for an ending of the ban and the efficiency with which the Government's arrangements were being carried out. The events of the past few days tell a very different story, and yesterday's lobby by farmers portrayed an image of chaos and shambles. During the past couple of days, a number of the issues involved have been raised in the House.

I do not intend to adopt a confrontational approach, however. We recognise that some people are anxious to see politicians working together in trying to ease what is an extremely difficult situation for the beef industry. Inevitably, that industry has dominated a debate that is supposed to be about agriculture policy as a whole, and it will dominate my speech.

I seek to be constructive, and I consider that, along with my hon. Friends—particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East (Dr. Strang)—I have gone to great lengths to take a constructive approach. I am grateful to the Secretary of State for Scotland, who complimented my hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton (Mr. Robertson) and me on our constructive attitude. That will probably mean a fairly early end to my political career!

Let me say, however—with no disrespect to the Ministers who are present—that it was with considerable regret that I noticed that no Scottish Office Minister was in the Chamber. One such Minister was present yesterday, but only for a short time. Moreover, no Scottish Conservative Back Benchers have spoken about these key issues. I am sorry to have to say that. We recognise that the organisation of agriculture in the United Kingdom takes into account the very different influences in our various regions and nations and, although many of my remarks relate to UK agriculture as a whole, I must make a number of points that are exclusively Scottish.

Mr. Baldry: No doubt the hon. Lady is aware that the Scottish Minister who deals with agriculture has been discussing with the Norwegian Minister a matter of considerable interest to the Scottish fishing industry. Earlier, Opposition Members made comments about whaling, and I think that there would be considerable concern if Scotland's interests in that regard had not been pursued.

Mrs. Liddell: I wish that the Minister would recognise that one of the great disadvantages for Opposition Members is the fact that Scottish agriculture is dealt with in the other place, by Lord Lindsay. It is regrettable that no Scottish Office Minister has been able to make himself available even to listen to the debate and then convey to his colleagues the issues that are likely to be raised. My hon. Friend the Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes) raised a number of issues arising from the lobby by Scottish farmers who travelled here yesterday. I recognise, however, that many of the issues that we confront in relation to BSE affect every part of the United Kingdom. Indeed, we have much to learn from other parts of the UK. Many Northern Ireland Members have made valuable contributions that have helped us to understand how people there are coping with the problems, and the kind of problems that are involved.

We learnt yesterday that the Scottish unemployment figures had increased, and a Minister admitted that a large proportion of that was due to the BSE crisis. There is a crisis in Scottish agriculture and throughout the Scottish economy, which is directly related to BSE. We must work together and address the issues constructively; there is no point in bluster from Conservative Members. Any points that we make, we make with the intention of making progress.

Agriculture is one of Scotland's leading industries. In 1995, Scottish agricultural output was equivalent to £2.1 billion. The industry employs some 200,000 people. The Trustee Savings bank has estimated that the jobs of about 21,500 people in Scotland could be affected by the beef crisis. That is a catastrophe that far outstrips all the industrial catastrophes that we have experienced in the past 17 years of Conservative government. That is why Opposition Members are keen for the ban to be lifted soon.

It is unfortunate that, early in today's debate, a Conservative Member spoke of the lack of a constructive approach. I have listened with great interest to the speeches and interventions and, if there has been a lack of a constructive approach, it has tended to be among Conservative Back Benchers. Opposition Members are anxious to move forward in concert.

At Question Time today, the issue of the food export market was raised. The food export industry is angry at what is happening to it as a consequence of the beef crisis. It is a significant United Kingdom industry, with an

annual turnover of £500 million, and a significant Scottish industry, with an annual turnover of £120 million. It is furious, especially in Scotland, because 20 per cent. of its market has been lost; it has lost 42,000 tonnes a year and £2.3 million a week. It is anxious for answers and for a sense of direction from the Government about what will happen to it.

Mr. David Nicholson: The hon. Lady has accused Conservative Back Benchers of not having any constructive ideas and has gone on to complain about the problem facing this country's food exporters. She has heard from my hon. Friends about the great importance, if there are orders out there—of course, at the moment, there may not be—of bypassing the ban and of exporting beef to third countries outside the European Community. What is her party's position on that?

Mrs. Liddell: I am interested in the hon. Gentleman's point because the Government have repeatedly evaded the question of exports that are already out of the country and unable to be sold. We know that about 500,000 tonnes are blocked in South Africa. We need answers from the Government about what assistance that part of the industry is likely to receive, and what advice is likely to be available to it. Those issues cannot be ducked and must be dealt with in some detail.

The downstream effects of the beef crisis must also be dealt with in some detail. The Government's attitude has been that the market will rectify the position. Every piece of correspondence that I have read in relation to the downstream effects repeatedly claims that the market will correct the difficulties. There is a critical difference between what is happening in England and Wales and what is happening in Scotland. I would welcome Ministers' advice about what measures are likely to be taken to ensure that Scotland is not disadvantaged.

I understand that, yesterday, representatives of the Trades Union Congress, the Scottish Trades Union Congress and the Transport and General Workers Union met in the Ministry to talk about the possibility of access to European funds to compensate workers in the industry affected by the beef crisis. I understand that the discussions related to objectives 5a and 5b. The Minister undertook to consider examining routes whereby that assistance to those in the downstream industries that have been affected could be made available.

The Secretary of State for Scotland has made a specific statement that no compensation will be offered or will be considered for those people in downstream industries in Scotland. That is manifest unfairness. I hope that it is a gremlin in the works and that, at the highest levels, action will be taken to ensure that Scottish workers are not disadvantaged as a consequence of Government action.

Mr. Riddick: I think that I heard the hon. Lady say that 500,000 tonnes were in South Africa awaiting to be shipped back into this country. Is that what she meant to say? She may have meant 5,000 tonnes or perhaps 50,000, but 500,000?

Mrs. Liddell: I am sorry; it was a slip of the tongue. The figure is 27,000 tonnes, which is still a substantial amount, particularly for an industry that is especially vulnerable. The fact that no one is prepared to deal with such matters and to give us clear answers on what the Government's policy and attitude are causes considerable difficulty.

The Government may have a tendency to assume that they have nothing more to lose in Scotland and that, therefore, they need not take into account some of those considerable difficulties, but, as all hon. Members on both sides of the House will recognise, issues of fairness are involved in some of the catastrophes that have been caused and in the tragedies that lie behind the individual figures and individual statements on downstream businesses. That extends not just to those who are directly involved in meat processing or haulage.

For example, the village of Larkhall had serviced a slaughterhouse. Its closure meant the inevitable closure of those laundries. Shed builders in Lanarkshire in my constituency have seen their orders disappear as a consequence of the understandable measures that have been taken to try to reassure public health concerns.

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Douglas Hogg): Will the hon. Lady make it clear what her policy is? Is she saying that anyone, anywhere in the UK, who can establish loss should be compensated? If the answer is yes, what does she quantify the cost as being?

Mrs. Liddell: I am grateful to the Minister because I was coming directly to that point. Some three weeks ago, I asked the Secretary of State for Scotland to institute an inquiry into the number of people in downstream industries who had been affected as a consequence of the crisis. In terms not only of agriculture, but of the overall development of the UK and the Scottish economy, it is important to have that information. The compensation scheme that I have referred to—the Minister may not have heard me as he was talking to the Minister of State—relates to the European schemes that the TUC, the Transport and General Workers Union and the Scottish TUC raised yesterday with the Minister for Rural Affairs.

Those elements of compensation could be made available. The European Union has already made it clear that it would listen sympathetically to any claim. I want to ensure that that is progressed as quickly as possible, but putting one's head under the pillow and assuming that nothing can be done and nothing is happening is the wrong way in which to proceed. It is not the way in which to build public confidence and to restore equanimity and equilibrium to a seriously troubled industry.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Liddell: May I make some progress? I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman later.

Many people out there are frustrated by the fact that this crisis is almost two months old and the Government still have a tendency to behave as if it has only just happened. I listened with interest to what the Minister of State said about the use of the Ministry of Defence and the advice from the logistics experts. Why is that advice being sought only now? We have known for some two months that logistical problems of some considerable magnitude would be experienced as a consequence of the decisions that have had to be taken. Why are the

[Mrs. Liddell]

Government repeatedly sitting on their hands? The longer they do that, the longer the crisis dominates those innocent people who are being dramatically affected.

Mr. King: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way because it is an important point. Obviously, some people are suffering substantial losses. The Minister has made clear what the Government are trying to do for those directly involved, but the problem spreads widely and it will be difficult. I had not thought of laundries until she mentioned them as one illustration. She speaks for the Opposition on this and, obviously, she has a responsibility. She should make it clear whether she is suggesting that everyone who has suffered loss, in any respect, could look—if there were a change of Government—to compensation, because the other worry that some of us have is that this may last quite a time. These problems will continue. It is important that the House and the country know whether she is proposing compensation for anyone who has suffered loss, in any way, in relation to this serious position.

Mrs. Liddell: The right hon. Gentleman was not listening when I replied to the Minister of Agriculture. I have asked for an inquiry into the scale of the problem because, until that is done, there are no circumstances in which we can assess the true impact, both to the agriculture industry and to the overall economy, of the problem. Once we know that, we will know ways in which it can be dealt with. Yesterday's meetings in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, however, took place to discuss compensation schemes that may be available from the European Union. It would be foolish indeed if we did not prosecute every possible avenue to find out what assistance can be made available to people affected.

I should like to return to the specific case relating to head boners. The hon. Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) made a powerful speech yesterday, and I pay tribute to the determination with which he has prosecuted the case of head boners in his constituency. To ensure that I was adequately briefed for this debate and that the information that I had from the Scottish end of the industry was up to date, yesterday I telephoned Pinnacle Meats in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. The company also paid the hon. Gentleman a considerable tribute.

I refer the House to the specific case of T and T Meats Ltd. in Aberdeen. The owner-manager of that company is Mr. John Troupe. At the close of business on 29 March, he received a fax from the Scottish Office saying, "Cease trading immediately." He had no alternative, and no fallback. The company was very small and employed only six people. At the moment he received the fax, his livelihood and that of his workers was destroyed. I know that, with her background in small business, the Parliamentary Secretary will realise that one of the consequences of taking risks in small business is personal guarantee. As a consequence, Mr. Troupe has lost not only his business but his home, his pension and his future.

Mr. Troupe contacted the Scottish Office to ask for assistance and advice. Regrettably, he was told that assistance would be given only to companies that would continue to be part of the supply chain, and that therefore nothing could be done to help him. Indeed, Lord Lindsay was quite blunt in his response to Mr. Troupe. He said that it was not Government policy at any point to try to assist companies that had been affected as his company had.

Following a very distressing conversation with Mr. Troupe, I received a fax from a company further down the road called Leslie's Meat Products. Mr. Leslie said:

> "As from Monday 1 April 1996, Leslies Meat Products ceased trading as a result of new legislation".

He had been in the meat trade for 40 years and in business for 33 years. In the past year, his company had spent £500,000 to ensure that it could meet the regulations set down. He says that he has lost his business through no fault of his own; it went overnight.

The difficulties that such people face must not be mocked. They must be taken into account because they are replicated time and again. Incidentally, it is regrettable that T and T Meats Ltd. is in the constituency of a Scottish Office Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, the hon. Member for Aberdeen, South (Mr. Robertson). Such problems will be confronted time and again and the Government cannot pretend that they are not occurring. Free-market ideology has no place in trying to resolve such a crisis. There is no point in trying to follow the dictates of the market in a matter of such enormity.

I recognise that many complex issues have been raised as a result of the BSE crisis. I listened with great interest to what the Minister said about the intervention arrangements. I recognise that there is to be an increase to 9,000 tonnes, but it is still not adequate for the scale of the problem.

I urge the Minister seriously to take into account the problems of red tape. I understand that he is aware of the Orkney farmer who sent his beasts to the south of England on the understanding that they had been accepted for intervention, only to have them sent back at a cost of £9,000, which the farmer must pay out of his own pocket. The intervention scheme was not set up to operate in a crisis, but the Government must put a strong case for the reduction of red tape as quickly as possible, and do so in a spirit of concert and co-operation.

Occasionally, the Government give the impression that there is time to play with. Considering that the Government are so dominated by those who have an interest in cricket, they may find that acceptable, but people outside do not have the patience to wait until events come round full circle. We watched with great interest developments in the discussions in Europe over the past 24 hours. It is manifestly unfair of Conservative Members to make negotiating in Europe more difficult for the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food with their puerile attempts to use the opportunity to dish Europe for purely partisan motives.

In a most bizarre intervention, the Secretary of State for Scotland got himself into an awful state about the flying of the European flag on Europe day. I would call that juvenile if it were not an insult to the many intelligent juveniles I know. Ministers are not only being sent naked into the conference chamber, but their feet are being taken from under them before they get in the door. We need intelligent and rational responses that convince the European Union that we are serious in our determination

to address the issues that have arisen. Nonsense about retaliation and trade wars completely undermines attempts to have rational discussion on lifting the ban.

I was disturbed to read in *The Independent* this morning the suggestion that the Ministry's proposals for a 42,000-head selective slaughter have not yet been put in detail to Europe. Will the Minister give us a true indication of the situation? It is disturbing to read in a newspaper article a suggestion that the Government have not gone to the lengths of ensuring that such proposals have been put.

Mr. Douglas Hogg *rose—*

Mrs. Liddell: I hope that the Minister is going to clear that up now.

Mr. Hogg: There is of course a document setting out the concept of selective cull which was placed in the House of Commons Library some little time ago. That self-same document went in a dossier to every Agriculture Minister at the last Agriculture Council meeting.

Mrs. Liddell: I am grateful to the Minister. He must therefore tell the House why the concept has not so far been acceptable and what amendments have been made to make it acceptable. The ostrich-like attitude adopted in these matters shows a poor understanding of negotiation and a poor recognition of the scale of the problem and the need to move with speed. The attitude characterises the Government's behaviour since BSE was discovered in the 1980s. There must be a more responsible and serious attitude taken, not only by the Government but by Government Back Benchers, to the lifting of the European ban.

I am conscious that a substantial number of my hon. Friends and others want to speak, so I shall not take up the time of the House unnecessarily. Will the Minister give attention to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East on beasts born after the ban? My hon. Friend has tried to make a constructive point on the anxiety felt about the fact that 67 per cent. of identified BSE cases have been found in beasts born after the ban. My hon. Friend asked the Ministry for an inquiry to seek the sources of the feed that may have been contaminated. I suspect that the Government, beleaguered on all sides, thought that that was an unhelpful suggestion, but in fact it was extremely helpful. If we had an inquiry, which need take no more than two to three months, it might be possible to trace the sources of the feed that contaminated the system.

I do not suggest that contaminated feed is still going into the system, but, like my hon. Friend, I ask the Government to reconsider their opposition to his suggestion. I believe that if they did, it would help the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he goes to the negotiations. It would show that the Government had a commitment and a determination to seek every possible route to eradicate the difficulties.

The chaos over the past few weeks, with the introduction of the slaughter policy, has revealed an obvious lack of co-ordination that has been witnessed throughout the United Kingdom. I do not apologise for making a specifically Scottish point here. The industry in Scotland has its own liaison procedures, and it is obvious that there is no mirror image of those within government. Is there not a case for the Government to approach those within the industry who are responsible for co-ordinating its activities, to seek their advice and, through them, to try to achieve better co-ordination in the slaughter policy? That would be a meaningful step forward.

Quality assurance is important, too. We in Scotland, like the Irish, the Welsh and the people in many parts of England, are proud of the fact that we can put a quality label on our product—Scotch beef. We have a voluntary quality assurance scheme. I accept that that in itself is not adequate for the scale of the problem that confronts us now, but when my hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton and I met the Secretary of State for Scotland two months ago, we asked him to examine whether the voluntary scheme could be used as a framework to allow a more formal scheme to be put in place quickly. The right hon. Gentleman undertook to think about that option as soon as possible. Yet when he addressed the Conservative conference in Aberdeen at the weekend, we found out that he had not even begun to consider it.

Quality assurance is vital. In Scotland we are very conscious that one of the key marketing elements at the heart of all our products—not only Scotch beef but Scotch whisky and the other quality products that we supply to the European and international market—is quality. Scotland, the brand, is important to us. I regret that the Secretary of State did not take our helpful suggestion on board, and I repeat it tonight in the hope that, although no Scottish Office Minister is here, one of them or one of their officials may get round to reading *Hansard* tomorrow.

When Scottish farmers visited the House yesterday, it was obvious that the Government's inaction, and the apparent confusion and chaos, had caused great disappointment. Farmers wanted to make people aware of the full impact of that chaos on the beef and livestock industry. Yet they found a Government committed not so much to action as to alibi. Passing the buck has become the order of the day—but this is too important an issue to pass the buck on.

I believe that yesterday's employment figures were the first taste of trouble to come for everyone in the Scottish economy because of what has happened with BSE. Tragedies such as those of T and T Meats and Leslie's, both in Aberdeen, and those of all the other companies the length and breadth of Britain, are personal tragedies that cannot easily be overturned. People do not want sympathy; they want a sign that the Government are seriously taking on board the problems likely to be created.

In the resolution of the present appalling crisis, there is no place for the ideologues of free-market economics to stand back and wring their hands in the face of the devastation. From the laundries in Larkhall—I am glad that I was able to bring those to the attention of the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King)—to the shops in Shetland and the shed builders in my constituency, we see a trail of Government incompetence that can be measured in lost jobs, lost business and lost confidence.

It is no surprise that the people involved in the industry, many of whom would previously have been Conservative supporters, are complaining about the Government's double whammy of lost jobs and lost markets. The long-term implications of the catastrophe will last for years.

[Mrs. Liddell]

As my hon. Friends said yesterday, it is regrettable that rather than confront the consequences of their own ineptitude and face a vote in the Lobby tonight, the Government Whips have sent their Members home. That shows that the Government are not only devoid of leadership but insensitive to the plight of thousands. They are insulated by their own arrogance.

5.35 pm

Sir John Cope (Northavon): The hon. Member for Monklands, East (Mrs. Liddell) was unwise to start her speech by saying that she would not adopt a confrontational approach, when presumably she knew perfectly well that she intended to wax lyrical about the Government sitting on their hands, about their incompetence and about all her other accusations. If she knew that she intended to say those things, she should not have started off by saying that she was not going to take a confrontational line. That was a ridiculous way in which to begin.

When the hon. Lady was asked what she would do, she said, of course, that she would set up an inquiry. We have come to recognise that as the standard Opposition response, dictated by the spin doctors to give every impression of offering assistance while avoiding expenditure commitments.

Towards the end of her speech, the hon. Lady talked about the need for co-ordination, and there I entirely agree with her—except that she seems to have ignored the fact that the Minister of State has daily meetings for exactly that purpose with the representatives of all the interests concerned with the beef crisis.

The debate is potentially wide, but it is necessary to talk about the beef crisis first. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister of Agriculture said, that is a tragedy, because, until 19 March, the whole agriculture industry was doing well. Since then, the terrible tragedy has hit us, and it has been extremely difficult for all concerned. The situation is made more difficult to accept, both for ourselves and for the farmers and others involved, by the fact that European Union relief always seems about to arrive next week rather than this, and that goes on week after week.

We discussed the 30-month slaughter scheme earlier in the week, and again yesterday. The Minister of State briefed some representatives of my local National Farmers Union yesterday during the lobby by the farmers, and I am glad to say that he could show them that he and the rest of the Government are working hard on the problem and doing their best to achieve the co-ordination that the hon. Member for Monklands, East, as well as everybody else, including myself, wishes to see.

It is essential to build up the slaughter scheme for cows older than 30 months as fast as possible, but it must be 100 per cent. secure. The Minister of State is right to emphasise, as he has done both yesterday and on other occasions, the fact that it is vital that the scheme be totally reliable. There are plenty of people in the media who will try to eat away at it and prove that it is not working, and any such publicity would be exceptionally damaging for everyone concerned in every part of the beef chain.

Some Members seem to think that the Treasury, a Department in which I served for a while, may sometimes be holding things up. I therefore take the opportunity of assuring hon. Members that the Treasury is a shrewd, hard-headed Department, whose inhabitants realise full well that delay in setting up the slaughter scheme and in getting it running effectively would not be in the Treasury's interests any more than it would be in anybody else's interests.

There is a considerable backlog, which we have discussed. The bigger the backlog becomes because of delays in setting up the scheme, the greater the need for emergency measures, which would obviously be expensive for the Treasury. More importantly, delays in the slaughter scheme will delay the recovery of confidence, which is the last thing that we want. The recovery of consumer confidence is at the heart of the matter in the United Kingdom, in the European Community and in the rest of the world. We have been told that confidence is a central motive of the European ban, which was said to have been introduced specifically for market reasons rather than for scientific reasons.

The fact is that continental Governments have, by their actions, damaged their beef markets to a greater degree than our beef market has been damaged. That should not be surprising because when the Government, veterinarians and scientific and medical opinion in a country say that all beef—but British beef in particular—may be unsafe, the effect on confidence is likely to be greater than in a country, such as the UK, in which the Government, veterinarians and medical opinion say the opposite, that beef is safe. That is one of the reasons why confidence in this country has held up better than it has in Germany and in other countries across the continent.

One of the most pernicious aspects of this affair has been the behaviour and treatment of the EC standing veterinary committee. I do not wish directly to impugn the professional integrity of other EC member states' chief veterinary officers, who sit on the committee, but it seems that their decisions have been taken on market grounds rather than on scientific grounds. If that is so, that is quite wrong and exceptionally damaging, as I have explained. Governments have legitimately a responsibility for markets and for market confidence must take action accordingly, but chief veterinary officers should stick to scientific opinion. It would be in our interest if they did so.

The arguments have become rather circular. Governments say, "We must restrict beef sales to protect public confidence," and the public say, "There must be something in all this if the Government are restricting beef sales." So the argument on the continent seems to go round and round.

We are making some progress, for which I pay tribute to my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and in other parts of the Government. The Commission and some member states now seem to be much more on our side than they were a few weeks ago, and obviously President Chirac's remarks yesterday have helped, as have his actions.

The Commission has a specific responsibility in this matter because its duty, after all, is to look after the entire Community's interests. I know that the Commission is worried about the crisis because I have pointed out the problem to it and was told that it is worried. The

Commission is right to be worried about the effects of the beef crisis on the British people's collective view of the European Union and of the value of membership of it.

Mr. Cash: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir John Cope: No. I hope that my hon. Friend will forgive me, but the ten-minute rule is in effect. No doubt, he will be able to contribute later to the debate.

We must recognise that the problems of persuading other countries to lift their bans are very considerable when their beef markets have been badly hit. The Dutch have slaughtered 60,000 British veal calves, which of course were well under 30 months old, in the course of the crisis. It will obviously be difficult to get those countries to turn back and to adopt a positive attitude towards British beef.

It has become increasingly clear in the past few weeks that beef is price sensitive, which is why intervention is important and why the comments today about intervention by my hon. Friend the Minister of State are important in attempting to achieve a recovery in the beef market. It is also extremely important that we get on with reform of the common agricultural policy, and that the British Government continue to do all that they can to press for reform. The longer reform is delayed, the more quickly reforms will have to take place, which will be in no one's interests because farming is a long-term business. I therefore support everything that my hon. Friend the Minister said about pressing for early and wide-ranging reform of the CAP.

5.45 pm

Mr. Peter Hardy (Wentworth): In a moment, I shall try to follow the right hon. Member for Northavon (Sir J. Cope), but I should first like to say that I am grateful to the Minister of State for allowing me to intervene in his speech to mention poultrymeat. The only difficulty is that the answer he gave me about poultrymeat is the type of answer he would have given me about beef up to about 1995. The Government really should have learned some lessons.

We have had a very severe lesson: almost one third of Britain's cows will be killed and turned into toxic waste. Cows represent wealth. People in primitive communities measured their wealth by the numbers of cows that they owned. Those people would have been able to perceive the consequences and cost of destroying one third of their animals. They certainly would have known where to lay the blame. The blame must lie to a very large extent on Her Majesty's Government's refusal to introduce regulations, which was the approach adopted towards poultrymeat.

The right hon. Member for Northavon mentioned the hard-headed Treasury. Its hands are all-pervasive, and I imagine that it—the intelligent and hard-headed Treasury—would have perceived the very serious economic risks when BSE first emerged. It is aware of what is going on in every Department.

This debate is about the common agricultural policy and not simply about beef. Conservative Members fail to perceive a fundamental and historic problem. There was an enormous amount of rural poverty in Britain in the 1930s. In the second world war, the Government, not being dogmatic, had to assume enormous executive power to ensure an increase in food production. After the war, the Labour Government—the great Labour Government—introduced the Agriculture Act 1947, which underpinned the agricultural revolution, which then continued in Britain.

That Government ensured that the wealth that accrued to the developing urban areas spilled over into the rural areas. No Conservative Member with agricultural interests could deny that farmers were a great deal better off as a consequence of that. The architect of that policy was Tom Williams, who came from my own community. I wonder what he would think if he saw the antics of the Ministers who have occupied Whitehall place in recent years.

The problem is that the Government rely on their frequent boast that they are there diligently and successfully serving the national interest. They are not—if they have tried, they have failed. The same could be said about the steel industry. For several years, Labour Members levelled, justified and beyond any peradventure proved the charge that the Government were allowing the British engineering steel industry to be taken to the cleaners by unfair competition. The then Minister said that he would stand up for Britain—as Ministers have claimed today—and he came away from a meeting with a promise that the situation would be monitored. Six months later, the monitoring had not started and the Government were at a loss.

The fact is that we have seen appalling failures in the representation of our national interest. If the Government claim to have been in the lead in reforming the CAP, perhaps the Minister will tell us what proportion of EU expenditure has been devoted to agricultural structural support in the past 12 months. He may not want to give that information to the House because it will show that the CAP still dominates the EU economy.

I cannot understand why the British Government do not, from time to time, stand up for the national interest. I was horrified today when I received a report from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals about recent events outside Paris involving the fraudulent acquisition of British sheep and the most deplorable treatment of them. Such treatment must make the shepherds of Britain feel sick. As good stockmen, they care for the flocks that they rear and tend, only to see them tortured to death while French police look on in gross breach of the regulations of France and of the CAP. While it would not have been polite or courteous to mention the matter to Mr. Chirac this week, it is appropriate for us to go to the veterinary committee in Brussels and demand an explanation of how French authorities can tolerate that sort of behaviour.

Time does not allow me to go into the details of the report, but I shall give an illustration. Many of the sheep carried United Kingdom tags. One was hog-tied and left lying by a fence in full sight of the slaughter cradles. The sheep made several attempts to rise in its distress as it saw other beasts having their throats cut or sawn open. It was left in that condition until 10.34, when someone put it out of its misery.

People may say that one has to be tolerant of other religions. That is certainly the case, but unfortunately the activities at that religious festival were also in gross breach of Islamic law. Yet dozens of French policemen from the CRS, who are not slow to act when it is politically appropriate, stood by and did nothing.

[Mr. Peter Hardy]

Fortunately, our RSPCA officers were there. I hope that MAFF will take the information available from those responsible officers and pursue it in Brussels. If the French insist that we abide by CAP regulations, we are entitled to do the same.

The same argument applies to other matters. Some time ago, I helped a first-class food producer in my constituency to get a licence from MAFF to export its product to Europe. It had to go to about six different offices. It took 10 months to obtain a licence which in other member states firms can obtain over the counter. The firm in my constituency got the licence after I made representations. Such delays are ridiculous, and they reduce and blunt our competitive edge.

Not long ago, I had the opportunity to fly over a large part of north-west Germany. I had previously been looking at the large areas set aside in the metropolitan borough of Rotherham, similar to those which exist in many other parts of England. As we flew, I saw hundreds of square kilometres of fertile land. I said to my companion, who knew a great deal about agriculture, that I could not see a single square metre of set-aside. He said that, since the set-aside policy was introduced, German farmers had tried to grow three crops a year instead of two.

We tie one hand behind our back, but Conservative Members do not blame the Treasury Bench. They blame Brussels. It is not Brussels that is at fault. It is ourselves, or rather—as they have the responsibility—Conservative Members. I am very concerned about set-aside, because I know that last year farmers in my constituency suffered enormous injustice under the set-aside regulations. I shall not say too much about it because time does not allow, but the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration is currently investigating the case. I hope that it is resolved, or his investigations are concluded, before I retire at the end of this Parliament.

The Government cannot make bombastic claims that they are leading the field for reform when the reforms are there to be had. They cannot claim to defend the national interest when they allow the French authorities to disregard grievous barbaric assaults on decency such as those that occurred outside Paris last week. They cannot say that they are leading British agriculture successfully when farmers are left in the state of anxiety in which many farmers in Britain are today. The sooner we see a different approach from much less complacent and self-satisfied people than those we have heard from in the past seven weeks, the better we shall be served.

5.54 pm

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): I know that I have only 10 minutes in which to speak. I should like to associate myself with the speeches of my hon. Friends the Members for West Dorset (Sir J. Spicer) and for North Dorset (Mr. Baker) in columns 988-93 and 1013-16 respectively of yesterday's *Hansard*. I shall not repeat the many points that they made about what Dorset farmers need. My hon. Friend the Minister will understand—from the fact that all three Conservative rural Members of Parliament for Dorset have sought to catch the Speaker's eye and have been successful—that we are extremely concerned about the position and want to emphasise what we need from Ministers.

I put it on record that I appreciate the fact that every time we have been to see Ministers with complaints—there have been genuine complaints about the problems that have been caused—we have had an enormously fast reaction. On Monday, I made a somewhat flippant remark about the fact that animals were not being disposed of in a Dorset abattoir and within 48 hours my hon. Friend the Minister assured colleagues that that particular abattoir would come on stream.

I know that my hon. Friend the Minister has examined the possibility of giving advance payment to farmers for beasts that are awaiting slaughter where there is a backlog in the slaughtering industry.

Mr. Baldry: We have all been concerned about specialist meat producers who know that, under the present regime, they will not be paid before their cattle are slaughtered. They are obviously anxious that their cattle should be slaughtered as speedily as possible. Clearly, we want to help them. In the exceptional circumstances, we have concluded that it is appropriate to make an advance payment to producers in respect of animals currently on farm.

My hon. Friend and others have made a good point. I and my colleagues are urgently studying how an advance payment might best be made. We are exploring ways in which a simple, straightforward, flat-rate payment per head can be made. I want arrangements that will get money to farmers as quickly as possible. It is an exceptional, one-off arrangement, which will be designed to help those with a backlog so that they know that they will receive money. I hope that hon. Members will welcome that move and that producers will see it as a positive attempt to ease the pressures that they are under.

Mr. Bruce: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that statement as early in the debate as he possibly could, so that we know what is happening. My farmers back in Dorset will also appreciate that.

The speech that I am about to make should not need to be made, but I wish to put the record straight once and for all. I intervened in the speech of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson) about his remarks on the origins of the scares and the assertion that the Government did not care about public health and were deregulatory to the extent that they would remove the help that regulations give to public health and safety.

I have given notice to the hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) that I intended to refer to him. In column 1028 of yesterday's *Hansard*, he said that page 13 of the House of Commons Library research paper on BSE published yesterday had made it clear that the Government's deregulation had caused the problem. He quoted the paragraph that he relied on. He did not quote the sentence immediately before it, which says:

"the 1981 order did mark a tightening of rules not a relaxation."

The hon. Member for Peckham (Ms Harman) referred to two documents when she replied to the Minister's statement on BSE. She suggested that they said that the Labour party wanted tighter regulations and the Conservative Government had introduced looser regulations. That was nonsense. The Conservative regulations are tighter than the regulations which the Labour party envisaged.

Mr. Elliot Morley (Glanford and Scunthorpe): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bruce: No I will not, as I only have 10 minutes. The hon. Gentleman will have an opportunity to respond.

The situation is clearly described on pages 12, 13 and 14 of the brief that Labour Members were citing. The disgraceful behaviour of the hon. Member for Peckham led me to believe that she was briefing *The Guardian* because of the nonsense that was being produced in that newspaper. *The Guardian* decided that it was not going to take the tabloid headline route, but would give references on where it felt the Government had failed to act in the 1980s on BSE. I contacted one of the three reporters concerned, Paul Brown, and I want to put it on record that Owen Bowcott and Alan Watkins were the other authors of the report to which I shall refer. Those gentlemen did not do the usual thing for journalists and write a story without having the facts—they had all the facts and distorted them.

A previous Conservative Government had said that we needed controls on salmonella in feedstuffs for cattle. The Labour Government consulted and did nothing during their period in office. In 1981, the Conservative Government got to grips with the problem and brought in regulations for the testing of salmonella. The Library briefing makes it clear that the problem that has now been identified regarding the reduction of temperatures for the processing of foodstuffs is not a consequence of a deregulatory measure. It was decided to change the arrangements in the light of the Flixborough disaster, which effectively showed that high temperatures could cause problems to workers in such plants.

We now know that that was incorrect. We can all say, with the benefit of hindsight, that we should perhaps not have changed the measures, but no warning was received from any of the scientists. *The Guardian* article suggested that a warning was contained in a royal commission report on pollution, which stated:

"The major problem encountered in this recycling process . . . is the risk of transmitting disease-bearing pathogens to stock and thence to humans."

The reporters must have read the whole paragraph in the royal commission report.

Mr. Morley *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Bruce: The hon. Gentleman shakes his head—he clearly cannot have read the report.

Mr. Morley: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bruce: No. The hon. Gentleman can make his own speech in his own time. I have very little time, and I must get the record correct.

The paragraph in the report to which I am referring was produced by a learned body which was trying to get rid of—I am not sure whether this is a parliamentary expression—chicken shit. People were trying to get rid of chicken faeces, and it was suggested that a good way of doing so was to incorporate them into cattle feed.

The concern about the transfer of pathogens had nothing to do with the high-temperature processing of materials. The royal commission report stated that transfer could occur

"when the ensiling process takes place on the farm and inadequate precautions are taken to ensure that pathogens are not carried to the clamp, perhaps on the wheels of vehicles."

We have wonderful journalists in this country. They have read and understood the facts—certainly the reporter to whom I spoke understood them—but in this case, the journalists decided to write a story that would frighten people and give the wrong impression.

The hon. Member for Peckham said not once but twice in the House that the Government's

"reckless disregard for public health and their dogma of deregulation"—[*Official Report*, 25 March 1996; Vol. 1719, c. 712.]

have caused the crisis. That was the message that went out to people around the EC, and it has continued to be sent out today. Unless we understand that lies have been spoken, we cannot find the truth and discover where we should go from here.

6.4 pm

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): The hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) will forgive me, but I do not wish to abuse the protection that I am given under Standing Order No. 45A in terms of the 10-minute limit. I am sure that some of the points that he made will be dealt with in the winding-up speeches.

May I preface my speech by saying how disappointed I am that the usual channels have failed to achieve a proper amendable motion for this evening's debate? The Government would be quite wrong to believe that, because they have decided to pursue this course of action—despite the strong representations made by all Opposition parties—with the annual common agricultural policy debate, they have the right to establish this as a precedent. It is important for the House that the annual CAP debate is carried out on an amendable motion so that hon. Members have the maximum opportunity to voice an opinion that the Government can take into account when they negotiate price fixing annually on behalf of the House. Therefore, if it comes to a vote, I shall certainly recommend that my right hon. and hon. Friends vote to demonstrate their displeasure at the way in which the Government have handled this debate.

The two-day debate has been useful, as was the earlier half-day debate on the subject on Monday. It became fairly heated, but that is the way of these matters. The House has given thorough scrutiny to what I, who represent a beef-producing constituency, consider the most severe financial problem that my landward areas have experienced, certainly since I was elected and probably for a generation.

The collapse of market confidence in beef has had a terrible effect on the beef industry and associated businesses—and, indeed, on the whole rural economy. It is right, therefore, that the House should spend time looking at what the Government are doing and the consequences for our constituents. Some of my constituents are in desperate need of help. The uncertainty that is prevalent is driving them to absolute despair. The hon. Member for Monklands, East (Mrs. Liddell) referred to a number of poignant cases, and other hon. Members from both sides of the House could add to them. The perception outside is that the authorities have not responded with the urgency that our constituents have a right to expect.

[Mr. Archy Kirkwood]

Nevertheless, I must say that I acknowledge what Ministers have done. No one could claim that they are not trying hard, but the scale of the problem and the apparent lack of planning has overwhelmed beef producers and the industry, and more needs to be done. More important—this may not be a point for this debate—we must, as a House, be able in the fullness of time to look our beef industry and our primary producers straight in the eye and say that nothing like this will ever happen again. We must learn the long-term lessons.

The Government are up to their necks trying to deal with an urgent problem, and I accept this may not be the time to deal with my point, but I hope that they will bear it in mind that lessons must be learnt. The consequences of the crisis will not be confined to the beef sector, but will spread throughout every sector of agriculture in the coming months if we are not careful. The Government have done what they can. They have sent sympathetic messages, and the speeches made yesterday by the Minister of Agriculture and today by the Minister of State were helpful, but tangible help is necessary.

I want to make one or two suggestions that I hope will be constructive and be taken in the spirit in which they are offered.

If I were the Minister, I would examine the opportunities and prospects under the framework announced in the recent rural White Paper, which included some imaginative proposals. There were some mechanisms that could be used to provide temporary emergency help for the rural economy. That would require Ministers to go back to the Treasury and argue stoutly for short-term assistance and funding. I hope that they will consider that to try to mitigate the short-term losses.

I know that there are arguments about costs and that there can be no blank cheques, but Ministers should consider asking the Treasury, if the crisis is still unresolved in November, to consider temporary emergency tax relief, once cause has been shown, for the associated industries such as hauliers and marts. They have been hit by the crisis but are not earmarked for compensation. Little ingenuity and money could go a long way to create hope in the future for small rural businesses.

I hope that Ministers will use their good offices to put as much pressure as possible on the banks. I know that that has been done in the past and that, in general, the banks have been quite good, but the pressure on them will increase before the crisis is over. If the Government could use gentle persuasion in their contacts with the banks, that would help to create extra time to resolve problems.

I hope that Ministers will not forget that they could spend useful time with their colleagues in the Department of Health. The mental pressures on producers, certainly in my area, are intense. They put a great deal of themselves into their work and hate the idea of slaughtering beasts that they consider to be safe. The psychological pressure of financial difficulties, possible bankruptcy and seeing their lives' work destroyed is bound to lead to stress, illness, mental tension and perhaps even worse. The House cannot ignore that problem.

There are some more immediate actions that should be considered. The Secretary of State for Scotland has accepted that there are specific Scottish perspectives to the problem. The hon. Member for Monklands, East referred to them, and I do not need to reiterate what she said. I remind the House that £120 million of Scottish beef was exported last year—20 per cent. of total production. It is especially urgent for Scotland that the problem be resolved.

Everyone agrees that lifting the ban is essential. I wish the Government well in the negotiations on Monday. I am optimistic that the first progressive lifting of the ban on the three products that will be discussed on Monday will be the first step towards the progressive lifting of the whole ban.

When I and some of my hon. Friends visited the Commission, we found that there was a different perception there. It was willing to help, although it is true that its focus was on the eradication of the disease. It was explained that the fact that it had taken control of the situation by imposing a European ban in the short term had given it the ability to lift the ban unilaterally without the need for 14 sets of bilateral negotiations by the Government. It asked for more steps to be taken more quickly and it is understandable that it was seeking concrete proposals before going all the way to lifting the ban wholly. I hope that the Government will do everything within reason that would be adequate to the task. No one supports the German scheme of mass slaughter, but there is bound to be an additional selective slaughter scheme. The state of play on that remains unclear. The negotiations on Monday will be uppermost in the Government's mind, as is right and proper, but I hope that, in his reply, the Minister will comment on that.

There is also the problem of specialist herds, which especially affects Scotland. I know that a consultation paper has been issued, but I understand that producers in my constituency—certainly, owners of Dexter herds—think that the scheme is restrictive and may not help as much as the Government imagine. I hope that the Minister will take that to heart.

The Minister's opening speech dealt usefully with market supply measures as far as it went. While 9,000 tonnes is a step forward, in terms of the previous two tranches it is not enough. I ask him again to redouble his efforts to make intervention easier. The Prime Minister assured the farmers whom he met in Aberdeen last week that he would do his best to get rid of red tape. I take him at his word and I hope that something tangible will result in the next few weeks.

On the disposal scheme, rendering remains a bottleneck and is still not working properly. I was pleased by what the Minister said about the supermarkets that have been difficult about abattoirs getting into the scheme. We support his position on that. I hope that he will consider bringing forward cold storage and incineration measures as fast as he can. I was pleased by what he said about that. There is a case for the introduction of new incineration facilities because the problem will take a long time to sort out.

Will the Minister consider making better use of existing CAP mechanisms? He must argue in the EU for help under the beef special premium scheme. It may be possible to get earlier access to arable set-aside land for grazing. In the autumn, if the crisis has not been resolved, some beef producers may decide to give up beef and go into cereals. We would march into a cereal overshoot next year, which would be in no one's interest. In the short

term, perhaps for one year, he should examine the suckler cow premium, about which he has some discretion. The ceiling allows another £26, which he may be able to use. I hope that he will have early recourse to that to deal with some of the immediate problems. Perhaps the Minister could consider the reference herd—from memory, the number of animals in Scotland is 244,000. If that could be increased, it would take pressure off the market.

Finally, there is the framework for future protection. Although the immediate priority must be the emergency through which we are still trying to struggle, I hope that some part of the Ministry is applying its mind to the framework that will need to be created for farm assured schemes and promotions and the environmental countryside premium schemes. Those may help people diversify and give them other options that would not cause a knock-on effect on other sections of the industry. The Government can do valuable work in all those matters.

I understand the difficulties. The House must come together and produce a scheme on which we can all agree and which will restore confidence to the buying public. We must make producers confident that a line will eventually be drawn under the crisis and persuade them that it is worth continuing to produce beef in Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

6.17 pm

Mr. William Cash (Stafford): I want to refer to some of the criticisms—they might be called accusations—that are being made about how the so-called anti-Europeans, who are in fact Euro-realists, have regarded the beef crisis. I want to draw attention to the recent remarks of Mr. Geoffrey Martin of the European Commission on the "Today" programme. He said that the European Commission was going to meet 70 per cent. of the cost of the measures. Unfortunately, that is not correct. One might even say that it was misleading. Anyone who has read *Agra Europe* of 4 April will know:

"the EU can claim to be paying 70 per cent., of the cost, while after taking account of the rebate, the net payments are only 25 per cent."

Anyone who wants to follow that up can look at page 23 of the House of Commons Library research paper. I wanted to put that on the record to show that we are weary of hearing accusations against us when all we are trying to do is to present realistic and essentially practical arguments.

Yesterday, when he opened the debate, my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister said:

"the process of enlarging the European Union should present an opportunity for further reform"—[*Official Report*, 15 May 1996; Vol. 277, c. 968.]

of the common agricultural policy. The problem is that the Government know perfectly well that the main driving force of European policy for the intergovernmental conference is meant to be with respect to enlargement. It is no secret that I would like the single currency and all the fundamental issues put on the IGC agenda. I said so to the Prime Minister at Prime Minister's Question Time about 10 days ago. The common agricultural policy is part and parcel of the essential practical reforms that will be needed if we are to have a realistic and working European Community of the type that I described when I wrote a paper on the future of Europe at the request of the then Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Hurd) in January 1991.

As my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister clearly admits, if we go for a policy of enlargement, that will require reform of the CAP. Why on earth, then, is the CAP not being put at the top of, or as a prime item on, the agenda for the IGC? We cannot continue to say one thing and do another. That is the problem with so much of the Government's policy on Europe—and the Opposition share that problem. Whether it is on the Maastricht convergence criteria, monetary union or CAP reform, we are faced with the extraordinary sight of collusion between the two Front Benches.

The Euro-realists are the only people who are putting forward serious arguments to deal with the practical questions, whether on the Conservative or the Opposition Benches. We are then accused of trying to stir up anti-European sentiment—when we are trying to deal with the practical questions. For good measure, we are blamed for and accused of trying to create divisions within our respective parties, which is nonsense. We are coming up with practical questions all the time. The beef crisis is an example.

We must arrive at a solution that will help farmers. I have had telephone calls from farmer after farmer, starting at 6 o'clock this morning. I had lengthy discussions with them yesterday. They felt, and still feel, intensely impatient about the way in which all this is being conducted. I do not want to be unduly critical of Ministers, but it has been suggested to me that considerably more farmers might commit suicide than people might have died from CJD. We must not underestimate that problem, because the farming community gets rightly sensitive about the vast accumulation of burden that is being imposed on it. This is the worst crisis to hit the farming industry for generations, and that point must be taken seriously.

How effective are the Government being with the crisis? I hear the Minister of Agriculture saying that they want to act sensitively and by negotiation and persuasion. We then hear that there are to be retaliatory measures. Then we find that there are not. Once again, I must repeat that there is nothing illegal about proposing to suspend payments to the European Union in return—a sort of Poitiers return—for what it is doing to us. It is not a ban, but illegal sanctions that are causing untold damage not only to our farmers but to many other people in downstream industries. We must tackle the problem in a serious manner. Suspending payments would bring the EU seriously to the negotiating table. It would not be illegal. It would simply interfere with the cash flow arrangements, which are set out with a two-year span between commitments and payments. We should bring the EU to the table by taking effective action instead of just talking and talking.

We have spent most of these debates discussing the beef issue, but we should also consider the CAP and set-aside. I spent five or six hours with the Court of Auditors recently as a member of the Select Committee on European Legislation. It became crystal clear that the arrangements in hand for dealing with fraud are woefully inadequate, despite the good efforts of the court.

During the passage of the European Communities (Finance) Bill, I made some proposals that were supported by 30 hon. Members and I got an undertaking—given on the instructions of the Prime Minister—from the Paymaster General that the national Parliament, in particular our Public Accounts Committee, should be

[Mr. William Cash]

given the means properly to investigate European fraud in the United Kingdom. I put that to the Court of Auditors and I am given to understand that it is taking the matter seriously and will be discussing it with the chairman of the PAC and Sir John Bourn, the Comptroller and Auditor General.

If we are to deal with the level of fraud that exists in the Community, we must put in place proper systems to enable it to be done. A culture problem exists because of the accountancy methods of other member states and those of the United Kingdom, as the Court of Auditors explained quite graphically to us. I would describe that problem in this way: there are politicians, businesses and companies on the continent that do not want anyone to have the faintest idea about how much they are ripping us off, and the Public Accounts Committee actually does the job properly.

That problem is another item that should be on the IGC agenda, because the fraud is massive. We are told that it amounts to around £6 billion a year, but if we take into account not only criminal fraud, but financial irregularity, it amounts to much more. That is another matter that needs to be tackled.

Finally, if we are going to be realistic, we must get the fundamental issues on to the IGC agenda—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Geoffrey Lofthouse): Order. The hon. Gentleman's time is up. I call the hon. Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Hughes).

6.28 pm

Mr. Robert Hughes (Aberdeen, North): First, I must make a few general remarks about the common agricultural policy. There seems to be universal agreement that the CAP needs radical reform. It is recognised that it is expensive and that it concentrates subsidy income in the hands of the largest and most prosperous farmers. Indeed, the word "farmer" now seems a most inappropriate description. A better one might be "agribusinessman", because that is what they are.

The trend towards greater output per acre, with increasing use of pesticides and fertilisers, is already affecting our environment. There are strong signs of pollution of the water table, apart from the known pollution of the rivers. So it is generally recognised that major changes are necessary.

I accept that a modest start has been made on the road to reform, but there is no great sense of urgency in tackling those problems. The fact that there is so much agreement yet so little real desire for change reminds me of the saying of St. Augustine:

"Give me chastity and continency—but not yet."

The resistance to change is caused by the large number of vested interests. I sometimes think that the common agricultural policy would be better described as the "communal assistance policy", because that is what it really is. That is what makes change slightly more difficult.

One of the other charges made against the CAP is that it encourages over-production, but one should exercise caution before condemning all over-production. In some commodities, such as grain, over-production is desirable and it can be dangerous to balance supply and demand.

A few days ago, I heard a report that world grain stocks are down to 30 days' supply. Two of the best grain belts in the United States of America have had bad winters—one a long, cold winter, the other a long, wet winter—and it is estimated that US grain production this year could be down to a third of what is usually expected.

I use those reports not to be alarmist, but simply to demonstrate the need for common sense when discussing over-production issues. I none the less believe that CAP reform is urgent, but fear that there is not much will in the Community to set the process in motion.

The issue that has dominated the debate in the past two days is the BSE crisis. It has exercised our minds in the House for the past eight weeks, and of course it has exercised the minds of the farming community.

Some hon. Members have railed against sensational reporting, and some have railed against the Opposition, blaming the Labour party for the problems. The latter proposition is preposterous. Both those charges are an admission that the Government have lost control—if they ever had control—of the situation.

I concede that many of the reactions to the BSE crisis have been irrational. A couple of days ago, I was speaking to some people who were sitting happily puffing away at their cigarettes. I asked if they were still eating beef, and received the reply: "Not likely. Not with all this BSE around." Yet the damage to health from smoking is well documented and scientifically proven. So there is a distortion of perception.

Happily, confidence is returning to the market, but the industry cannot begin to restore its fortunes until the export ban is lifted. The prospects of a full lifting of the ban are not improved by the feelings of frustration at the chaotic start of the slaughter process that are evident from the criticisms by the farming community.

The Minister spent much time today detailing what he had done and meetings that he had had, yet, as yesterday—I do not think opinions have changed since—the feeling was that he got off to a bad start and was likely to get worse unless some big improvements were made.

I do not want to do or say anything that will damage recovery. All I want to say is that traceability of cattle movements must be rigorously enforced. If we choose the route of quality assurance schemes, the claims of quality and origin must be watertight. In future, the farming community and the Government must accept that regulation is not a bureaucratic impediment but an essential for the health of the industry and—perhaps more important—the health of the consumer.

There are grave injustices in the compensation scheme. The Minister of Agriculture has said that £1 billion has been set aside for compensation. That is a considerable amount. The Prime Minister went further in Aberdeen last weekend, when he again used the figure of £1 billion, but said that the figure might well be higher, and that, if it was higher, the money would be found. It would be remarkably good to do that, but who will gain access to compensation?

Yesterday, the Minister of Agriculture said:

"We have therefore targeted resources on the critical links in the chain, so as to provide a breathing space during which the sector can adjust to the new market circumstances. To achieve this, we have committed around £1 billion in support of farmers, renderers, abattoirs and cutting plants."

I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Monklands, East (Mrs. Liddell) raised again today the issue I raised yesterday with the Minister of Agriculture of Mr. John Troupe of T and T Meats of Aberdeen, who dealt in ox heads. I draw attention to a specific problem that the Minister must tackle. Dealing with ox heads is a licensed trade, carried out throughout Scotland and probably in other parts of the UK. I understand that, in Scotland, about 100 jobs are involved.

Mr. Troupe received a fax message from the Scottish Office, ordering him to cease trading forthwith—not in a couple of days, a week or a couple of weeks, but forthwith. His business is gone. His employees have no job. There are no jobs running around begging in Aberdeen; it is prosperous, but there are not many jobs on the oil rigs, where everyone supposes that there are stacks of jobs, for people made redundant from this trade. All attempts to obtain a sympathetic hearing and a practical response have failed.

Yesterday, the Minister also said:

"There are others who have suffered loss—hauliers, processors, shops and retailers. I know perfectly well that people have lost their jobs, and I have the utmost sympathy for them—this is a beastly business."

I am sure it was not intended to be a pun.

"But we cannot pay money to everybody who has suffered loss. Therefore, we must define the principles on which we are to operate, and they are those that I have outlined to the House on this occasion and on others."—[*Official Report*, 15 May 1996; Vol. 277, c. 977.]

Earlier today, the Minister of State said that he did not wish to move beyond precedent. Precedents are there to be broken, not the bedrock of which nothing should be shifted.

The difficulty is that people in Mr. Troupe's category and others have no breathing space to adjust to the changes in the marketplace. That is it—finished. The Government said in their defence—I accept that there may be something in it—that they could not extend the compensation scheme to everyone who might have a claim, including the local corner shop. Of course one understands that. We have been around this course before regarding who gets compensation.

The Government have a decommissioning scheme. Who receives the benefit of the vessel decommissioning scheme in fishing? The boat owners. Every attempt to obtain compensation for those who work in the industry and have lost their jobs is set aside as though they were of no account. It is not as though the European Commission has done nothing. The Commission devised a scheme to compensate redundant fishermen, but the Conservative Government would have none of it. It is not that there is no possibility of doing something—it is simply that the Government are not interested.

There was a sneer from the Conservative Benches when my hon. Friend the Member for Monklands, East said that a long, strong look should be taken in Europe at the way in which compensation might be extended as far as possible to others who suffer.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

6.38 pm

Mr. Tim Rathbone (Lewes): The hon. Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Hughes) will forgive me if I do not follow his argument exactly.

I entered the debate to draw attention to the fact that this problem is shared in Sussex and the south-east. I come from that part of the country, and represent a constituency there. The experience of my constituents has not yet been represented in the debate. Farms are affected whether they are on the downs or on the Weald, and the problem affects dairy herds, but is not confined to them, in the constituency that I represent. Food producers in my constituency and in the surrounding area have been desperately affected by the beef crisis.

Unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Cash)—who is no longer in his place—I am grateful for the assiduous work of the Minister and his colleagues in coming to grips with the problem. I am also grateful—this has not been said so far—for the continuing interest and deep involvement of the Prime Minister and other Ministers. There have been unending discussions at the conference table in Brussels—something which seemed to be overlooked by my hon. Friend. In addition, Ministers have worked continuously to prepare the measures that have been developed and put into action.

As my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) pointed out, the crisis is not the result of Government bungling—as was claimed by the hon. Member for Wentworth (Mr. Hardy), in his unusually dramatic speech, and by the hon. Member for Peckham (Ms Harman). The crisis came about because of the leak of information about a possibility of a link between BSE and CJD—a claim that was unproven. The Government were correct to respond immediately. The crisis is due to the ambivalence of British and continental scientists, and to the untimely European Union ban.

We have a long-established BSE problem. In fact, British beef was banned by the United States in 1988—it was certainly some years ago—and by Canada a year or so later. Therefore, it was all the more peculiar—this is a criticism not of the Minister but of the Government as a whole—that there was no, or did not seem to be any, contingency plan for this sort of event. There was no contingency plan against the possibility of another BSE breakout, against the possibility of other scientific developments, against the possibility of greater information becoming available about CJD, against the possibility of an extension of bans existing prior to last March, or against many other aspects.

This is something that the Government should take to heart and note. In this sphere of Government activity—as in almost any other—there must be contingency plans for the most unlikely events, so that the Government are better prepared to meet the exigencies.

I refer to the present needs of the beef industry. Action must be taken to help the clean beef market. A farmer in my constituency reported that prices for beef cattle fell, on average, by 15p a kilo between February and March—when he last took them to market—and this month. Therefore, I was delighted to hear the Minister say—if I understood him correctly—that consideration is being given to some top-up payment for food for animals that are sold and slaughtered, and for food for animals that are being kept prior to sale or slaughter.

In some small part, a top-up payment will compensate farmers for the additional cost of feeding and pasturing cattle while they await slaughter. This is particularly important in my part of the world—it is probably all-pervasive throughout the nation. The lack of

[Mr. Tim Rathbone]

availability of food for cattle is becoming severe—food stocks ran down over winter and, because of the present cold weather, the grass is not growing.

There is a strong belief that all cattle that are slaughtered under the 30-month policy should be tested for BSE. I understand that there is no provision for such tests in the present plan. If all the cattle are tested for BSE, it will provide invaluable information for future policy development, and it could help to develop techniques for live tests for BSE in the future.

I give the Minister two plaudits. First, there is general acceptance of the marketing activities that are being undertaken—they are much appreciated. They have been based on careful research. I hope that they will lead to the restoration of consumer confidence and to the restoration of consumer purchase and consumption of beef. The fast food chains were too quick in their emotional reaction—it was an unsatisfactory reaction—to this crisis, and in banning British beef.

The second plaudit is that, until now—I do not know whether it is the result of Government influence—the banks have been reasonable. I refer to this not just to praise the Government, but to anticipate their giving support to the banks so that they continue their support in the future. This will be a long-drawn-out process, and their help will be important.

In summary, I believe that immediate action is needed for the clean beef market, and I hope that the Minister will soon be able to announce the details of his plan. Ever better management of the present scheme is needed to get matters moving and to keep them moving. A number of hon. Members have mentioned various activities that need to be pursued. All arms of Government need to be involved in and committed to burning the midnight oil to bring the matter to a conclusion.

We must get the bans lifted, and establish a firm and self-confident basis for the future of British beef, British dairy herds and British cattle generally. The Government must maintain their efforts and expand them in leading the effort within the European Union to bring about reform of the common agricultural policy. It is a practical need that is necessary, and it is a financial need that is necessary. The Government have taken the lead for many years, and they must continue to do so.

6.47 pm

Mr. Andrew Welsh (Angus, East): I thank the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Rathbone) for referring to contingency plans, to information and to action. I hope that the Government follow through many of the points that he has made.

Although this is a general debate on the common agricultural policy, it has been dominated by the BSE crisis. There is real anger and frustration throughout agriculture and its ancillary industries. Yesterday's lobby was part of a wider campaign by an industry under threat and running out of time. Farmers and ancillary businesses are facing cash flow problems that threaten their existences. We have seen eight weeks of inadequate action, failure in Europe and continued dithering by the Government.

I remind the Minister of the importance of agriculture and the beef industry to Scotland. Agriculture represents approximately 3 per cent. of Scotland's gross domestic product—twice the proportion in the United Kingdom as a whole. The beef industry represents approximately 30 per cent. of Scottish agriculture, compared with 10 per cent. in the United Kingdom. In 1995, 20 per cent. of our top-class beef was exported, at a value of £118 million. Therefore, the economic effects of the current beef crisis are proportionately greater in Scotland than in England precisely because of the greater importance of agriculture, particularly beef, to our economy.

Agriculture represents approximately 2.1 per cent. of total civilian employment in Scotland, and approximately 21,500 Scottish jobs are directly affected by the current crisis. The BSE crisis has the impact on Scotland of two Ravenscraigs. It affects farms, auction marts, abattoirs, renderers, manufacturers, retailers and bakeries.

The transport situation is critical, with four out of every five vehicles that are involved in transporting meat and livestock now off the road. It is estimated that, for every 100 jobs lost in agriculture, 288 jobs will be lost in the Scottish economy generally. The similar figure is 342 in the slaughtering and meat processing industries. That is a devastating situation, which requires urgent action.

At the end of March, *The Scottish Farmer* stated that the total number of reported cases of BSE in the United Kingdom comprised 88.89 per cent. of cases in dairy and dairy cross-breeds, compared with 5.74 per cent. in beef and beef cross-breeds, and 5.02 per cent. in beef-dairy crosses and dairy-beef crosses. According to the Highland Cattle Society, only 5.5 per cent. of all beef herds have home-bred cases of BSE. In the case of the Highland breed, the figure is 0.01 per cent.

The incidence of BSE is lower in Scotland than in England, where it resides mainly in the dairy sector. In Scotland, there are two beef cattle for every dairy beast. In England, that ratio is reversed, at 3:1. About 70 per cent. of Scottish beef originates from suckler herd cows which are kept to produce only beef animals.

I believe that the Government have been completely ineffective in addressing the fears of our European Union partners about a crisis impacting across Europe. The Government's proposals comprise two aspects: the disposal scheme for cattle aged more than 30 months, and the cohort slaughter policy. While we believe that the former is wholly arbitrary, we welcome the latter as a step in the right direction.

However, the cohort policy must go a step further. We believe that the solution should involve an extension of that policy and of the quality assurance scheme, to guarantee naturally fed BSE-free herds. If there is a recurrence of BSE after the cohort slaughter policy has been deployed, the entire herd should be slaughtered, as occurs in France and Ireland. The Ministry of Agriculture has not been prepared to go that far, but it would help to restore public confidence in the beef industry—which is the admitted aim of the Commission.

I recommend to the Minister the Trustee Savings bank report by Donald MacRae, which was published on 31 March. It notes:

"Scottish beef is sufficiently different from British beef both in origin and in BSE incidence to merit a different approach to the problem".

That view is shared by experts in the field, including Professor Hugh Pennington, professor of microbiology at Aberdeen university, as well as by many Scottish farmers.

MAFF predicts that the identification scheme will be in place in two months, and that could lead to a lifting of the ban for quality beef products. The EU Agriculture Commissioner, Franz Fischler, made it clear to Scottish National party and Northern Ireland Members of the European Parliament that a regional or zonal approach could be applied to quality herds. Happily, his view is shared by European farm Ministers.

However, the Commission said that such a proposal must come from the Government. I ask the Minister: who is representing the Scottish case? The Secretary of State for Scotland is not in the Chamber, and Scottish Office Ministers are notable by their absence. We cannot expect MAFF Ministers to represent our case adequately.

The proposals to relax the ban on gelatine, tallow and semen confirm the willingness of both the European Union and the British Government to adopt an incremental approach to lifting the ban. The priority is to breach the blanket ban now and to extend that breach, step by step, as quickly as possible. It does not matter whether the ban is breached for gelatine or, preferably, for quality beef products from Scotland or Northern Ireland: it is important simply to breach the blanket ban and gradually push back the frontiers.

However, the European Union will react only to United Kingdom Government initiatives. Scotland and Northern Ireland quality beef should be at the forefront of any step-by-step breach of the blanket export ban. I recommend to the Government the early-day motion—signed by about 90 hon. Members from all parties—which supports a zonal or a regional exemption scheme.

The crisis has emphasised the interrelationship of different agricultural sectors. I shall give the Minister an example. Rotational grass forms a large percentage of cropping area in Scotland, which means that big swings in cropping area are possible on mixed arable and livestock units. The BSE crisis could encourage mixed farmers to plough out grass and to sow spring barley, causing an increase in overshoot of the base area—which was never large enough—that does not have less favoured area status.

What will the Government do to prevent that increase in overshoot, which could be as much as 5 to 7 per cent. this year? Purely arable farmers could be penalised for the actions of mixed farmers who are trying to solve their problems. Worse still, derogation on arable overshoot lapsed last year, with full penalties to apply in 1996.

The Committee of Professional Agricultural Organisations has called for the total abolition of penalty set-aside. The Commissioner said that he would examine the situation but that he needed some feedback from farm Ministers. However, as yet he has received no help or encouragement from United Kingdom Agriculture Ministers. If agreement were reached, farmers could accept the financial penalty for overshoot without being required to set aside extra land.

Scotland is a net importer of cereals. Why should we set aside more land than is required of other countries under the standard rate of set-aside? There was discussion in Europe about averaging base areas within member states. Why has that not been agreed? Last year, non-LFA in Scotland overshot by 3.8 per cent., and LFA undershot by 10 per cent. If the areas were averaged, Scotland's non-LFA would have undershot by less than 1 per cent., which would mean no penalty set-aside. The BSE crisis is rippling through other sectors, and I ask the Minister to address those problems.

The Minister called for a proper and scientific approach to policy making. However, he has not answered my question about a test for contaminated foodstuffs. I was very disappointed in his answer to my question about testing the brains of slaughtered animals in order to provide evidence of the real situation regarding BSE contamination. Scotland is a quality export-oriented country, with three out of four Scottish farmers in beef production. Beef exports in Scotland constitute 20 per cent. of the market by volume and 21 per cent. by value. They are worth £2.3 million per week. While the crisis continues, a dagger is striking at the heart of Scotland's vital industry.

The system is gridlocked: I am told that about 50,000 cattle are backed up on Scottish farms. It will take 42 weeks to clear that backlog, and the industry simply cannot wait.

6.57 pm

Mr. David Nicholson (Taunton): At the outset, I must declare a couple of interests that appear in the Register of Members' Interests that may be related indirectly to the debate. I welcome the continuing commitment to reforming the common agricultural policy, which was reaffirmed by my hon. Friend the Minister of State and stressed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Sir J. Cope) and my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Mr. Rathbone).

The common agricultural policy must be reformed urgently, for three reasons. The first is cost. I am sure that—particularly in the light of our unhappy experience a few years ago—Conservative Members will not want to vote any more money to the European Community. A number of hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Wentworth (Mr. Hardy) and my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce), referred to set-aside, and that must be addressed. After 30 or 40 years, the means of determining member countries' payments to the European Community—which is not related to gross domestic product—remains unsatisfactory.

The second reason is the need and the desire for enlargement. Three countries—Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary—have in different ways earned their right to membership of the European Union through their suffering over the past 150 years in the cause of human liberty and of national independence. They should become members not in five or 10 years, but very rapidly. Therefore, I would like to admit them to the Union and thus put pressure on the existing members of the Union to sort out the CAP so that those countries can integrate into the single market gradually.

The third reason why we need urgent reform of the CAP is linked to what has become the main subject of the debate—the current beef crisis. As we have seen over the past eight weeks, there have been delays in reaching solutions, because many issues have had to be referred from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to Brussels. Every time that happens, there is a delay. That leads me on to the role of the Ministry in the crisis. I pay tribute to the way in which my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister of Agriculture and my hon. Friend the Minister of State have given detailed explanations to the

[Mr. David Nicholson]

House. A powerful case was developed in the debate on Monday by my hon. Friend the Minister of State. My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary has also played a stalwart role, especially in the west country, where the crisis is acute.

I received a written answer on 15 May, which described the small numbers of extra staff, mainly clerical and administrative assistants, who had been taken on by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food during the crisis. Perhaps the Select Committee will consider whether the Ministry has been properly staffed to deal with such a crisis. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes referred to contingency planning. I strongly suspect that there were not enough high-grade policy advisers in the Ministry, and I hope that such people will be employed to address the longer-term points that I put to my hon. Friend the Minister of State in an intervention earlier.

We have been anxious that high-grade and detailed information should be available from regional and area offices for farmers and others in our constituencies. I confess that I am not sure that that has been the case throughout the crisis. On occasion, Ministers, in trying to help the House—I do not say that there is any suggestion that they intended to mislead the House—have made statements that clearly did not reflect the situation in the field. Ministers have not been fully informed by MAFF officials of the situation and that is a problem that needs to be addressed.

Certain problems have been put to us recently that require urgent action. This morning, after yesterday's lobby, when farmers and others from Somerset came up to the House, I received a fax from the county chairman of Somerset National Farmers Union, Mr. Bartlett. He says that the situation has reached

"crisis proportions"—

and he continues:

"the situation must not be allowed to drift".

He also hopes that emergency powers might be sought to sort out the problem with the renderers and the absence of proper incinerating capacity, which might involve an emergency approach to the planning process. I know that the situation is difficult, but it is vital that it is dealt with.

Similar points have been made by my constituents and others in the region. Mr. Johnson, the NFU regional spokesman, has said:

"The top-up payments on farm support payments, whilst welcome, are not properly targeted. The farmers who need the help are those who had been selling cattle during the last two months."

Rebecca Barber, from the NFU West Group in Somerset, tells me:

"The market price for beef is falling drastically at the moment and farmers are obviously worried as to what on earth they are supposed to be doing with these animals."

Reference has been made to intervention and price support; when my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary winds up, perhaps she will refer to those matters specifically.

My hon. Friend the Minister of State has mentioned the regrettable action by some of the supermarkets. It is fair to say that Somerfield has been the leading culprit in making matters difficult for the abattoirs. There are enough difficulties in getting the cull cattle through the abattoir process and into rendering for us to wish to avoid that intervention by some of the supermarkets. I contrast their action with the welcome action yesterday by Asda.

The hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) made a reasonable speech. I am also glad to see the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) in his place. He usually speaks reasonably on such matters, but his speech on Monday, which I read, and I was present for most of it, was a typical example of the Liberal party scouring for every vote and raising every scare and perhaps smear.

I am not sure how far I should blame the hon. Gentleman for that, because he is rather like the early Red Army military units that had political commissars inflicted on them, which completely adulterated their approach to their normal job. For the whole of the hon. Gentleman's speech on Monday, his political commissar sat behind him—the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown), who has taken an entirely unrestrained party political attitude to the whole matter.

For example, I intervened in the speech by the hon. Member for North Cornwall and quoted the scary statement by the Liberal Democrat Member of the European Parliament for Somerset, that the Government had inflicted the crisis through the statement made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health on 20 March. The hon. Gentleman said that he would reply to that intervention, but he did not. Further, during his speech he suggested that some Conservatives—I hope that he does not include me—would like to see the ban prolonged to help their campaign against the European Union.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Nicholson: I am sorry, but I cannot give way. We are on 10-minute speeches and the hon. Gentleman has had many opportunities to speak on the subject.

I regret very much the role that the European Commission and the member countries have played. Some hon. Members have pointed out that the United States, Canada and Australia have had earlier bans, but we export very little beef to those countries because that would be like taking coals to Newcastle. Our major markets are in western Europe and we are cut off from those markets. Unlike some of my hon. Friends, I think that this unhappy business will have consequences for the way in which the Conservative party, our supporters and other constituents in the countryside regard the European Union in future. I will not discuss whether people will be sceptical or realistic: they will be critical. They will be critical not only of the current crisis—because it is not one black cloud in an otherwise blue sky—but of the other European matters. That will have important consequences for the important debate about monetary union, because I do not believe—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

7.7 pm

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley): One of the biggest flaws in the common agricultural policy is the tobacco production subsidy. If ever there was a waste of taxpayers' money, that is it. The subsidy gets far too little

attention, and I have not heard it mentioned by the Minister. I also read yesterday's *Hansard* and none of the three Ministers who spoke mentioned it.

This year, as every year, the European Union, through the CAP, will spend about 1 billion ecu on subsidies for European tobacco producers—that is more than £800 million spent on supporting tobacco production. A huge sum of public money is spent supporting a crop that has no positive benefits and that kills its consumers.

Furthermore, the subsidies support a crop that is almost worthless commercially. Tobacco growers in the EU produce so-called dark tobaccos, which are high in tar and unfashionable with consumers and manufacturers. There is little or no market for them. The CAP subsidies for tobacco were intended to encourage farmers to grow commercially viable varieties. The subsidies were supposed to help to maintain farmers' incomes while they adapted their production from dark to light varieties. The intention was to reduce imports into the EU, but the tobacco growers have simply absorbed the subsidies. Patterns of tobacco production have remained virtually unchanged and CAP-supported dark tobaccos continue to be sent outside the EU and light tobacco imported.

In 1992, the CAP reforms set a ceiling on tobacco production, but left unchallenged the principle of tobacco subsidy. Those reforms made no effort to eliminate the tobacco varieties that have low commercial value and, therefore, made no effort to achieve the CAP's stated aim of reducing imports.

Today, EU-based manufacturers still import 70 per cent. of their tobacco. Meanwhile, two thirds of the EU's own tobacco production is the cheap, high-tar crop that the CAP was supposed to eliminate, and most of that crop is dumped in eastern Europe and north Africa. Therefore, in relation to tobacco subsidies, the CAP has failed member states. It has also failed the citizens of Europe.

The CAP tobacco production budget is some £800 million compared with the smoking prevention budget of the EU organisation Europe Against Cancer of £1.2 million. That is nonsense. The World Health Organisation estimates—I believe conservatively—that nearly 500,000 EU residents die every year from tobacco-related illnesses. Yet the CAP spends upwards of £1,600 a head helping to kill those EU citizens. A mere 275 of the 182,000 European tobacco producers receive among them more money than the total budget of the European anti-smoking programme.

During the past day and a half, many hon. Members have pointed to discrepancies, inconsistencies and unfairnesses in the current beef market. Problems with beef and fish have been well aired. Some have expressed the view that the CAP is wrong-headed and its priorities muddled on occasion, and that is certainly true with regard to tobacco. But with tobacco, the CAP is moving into much more dangerous territory. It is spending money on subsidies that have an effect well beyond simple economics and national rivalries.

Tobacco-related illnesses accept no boundaries and obey no quotas. They strike at smokers and non-smokers alike. Tobacco is clearly a drug that kills. The House should question why we allow the CAP to subsidise such a disastrous undertaking.

Where is the value for money in killing consumers? The European Court of Auditors certainly could not find any. In 1994, it examined the CAP tobacco subsidies, two years after the reforms that were supposed to change the face of European tobacco production. The court said that the policy was badly managed and that the subsidies were a "misuse of public funds". The European Court of Auditors questioned the whole principle of subsidies for tobacco production.

We should consider that principle too, especially as it has already been proved that it would be cheaper to give farmers direct income support than to continue to subsidise tobacco production through the CAP. For example, in 1993, the average farmer's income from tobacco was 6,500 ecu. The European Court of Auditors estimated that 43 per cent. of that income was taken up with expenses associated with crop production. That left 3,700 ecu per farmer as the amount of income received from tobacco subsidy.

If farmers stopped growing tobacco and were instead paid the 3,700 ecu direct, the total cost to the CAP would be 556 million ecu—about 327 million ecu less than the subsidies being paid. In other words, the EU could save around £260 million a year by ending tobacco subsidies and eliminating production of the crop.

I urge the Minister to look carefully at the way in which the tobacco regime operates. An end to CAP tobacco subsidy and its replacement with direct income support must be a sensible first step. It would save taxpayers' money and free resources for other use. More importantly, it would end production of a patently uneconomic product—a product which kills its consumers and which the EU is inflicting on poorer countries by exporting the tobacco that we do not want to other parts of the world. Europe produces highly dangerous high-tar tobacco, for which the market in the EU is practically nil, yet we still waste millions on subsidising it.

I remind the House that just £1.2 million is being spent by the EU on anti-smoking programmes. There is a potential surplus within the CAP of more than £260 million, in the tobacco subsidy regime alone. Some of that should go to health education within the EU rather than to subsidising tobacco. The CAP has done and is continuing to do serious damage to Europe's health. Hundreds of thousands die every year and millions more fall ill. We should divert resources away from rewarding the killer towards supporting the victims and preventing new victims.

Tobacco-related illnesses kill and maim smokers and non-smokers alike. Tobacco knocks an average of 23 years off the productive life of its victims. It causes lung cancer, heart disease, strokes and chronic airways diseases. The CAP helps directly to maintain production of the worst and most dangerous kinds of tobaccos. As the European Court of Auditors said, that is a misuse of public funds.

I know why the House is concentrating on the problems in the beef market at the moment, and rightly so, but the issues that I have raised should be addressed continually until we remove from the CAP the subsidies that are effectively attacking public health and wasting public funds.

7.15 pm

Mr. Mark Robinson (Somerton and Frome): The hon. Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron) has reminded us that the debate goes rather wider than beef, but I make no apology for bringing us back to that topic. The crisis

[Mr. Mark Robinson]

facing the British beef industry is virtually without precedent in recent years, and it has been the most traumatic experience for many farmers in my constituency of Somerton and Frome.

I pay tribute to the NFU at all levels for the steady way in which it has coped with the crisis. The frequent meetings with Ministers and the willingness to discuss issues as they arise on a daily basis with local Members of Parliament have been appreciated and effective.

The same applies to Ministers who have made every effort to listen not only to the strong views of colleagues in the House but to representatives of a range of interests right across the agriculture industry.

That also extends to individual farmers, who have reacted to a most challenging and often frustrating situation with calm common sense. But as the days have moved into weeks, patience has been tested to the very limits, because there is nothing more debilitating than uncertainty and confusion, yet they have governed the situation since the crisis started in March.

In particular, there is nothing worse than to be told that a cull programme of animals aged more than 30 months is about to start, only to find more than a week later that it has not. That adds to the frustration, the boiling over and the kind of strong words that were used at yesterday's lobby here at Westminster which, to those who represent farming constituencies, was welcome.

Accordingly, I give a warm welcome to the clear and deliberate statement made today by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, which demonstrates that, at long last, the cull programme of cattle aged over 30 months is starting to approach its target levels. I hope that from now on it will run smoothly. But in saying that, I hope that my hon. Friend will monitor the situation carefully. The very build-up of the backlog has added to the pressures, and anything that he can do in the coming weeks to improve the situation so that there can be a slight acceleration in the achievement of his targets would be welcome to many farmers who still have to work out how to keep animals on the land.

I was glad to hear the assurances of my hon. Friend the Minister of State in regard to casualties, but that remains an issue that requires careful attention. Only this morning, I received a telephone call from a farmer in my constituency who is having problems disposing of a casualty animal. His frustration was palpable when he was told by his vet that it would be four working days before his animal could be dealt with, a fact that both he and I find utterly unacceptable. That frustration is compounded by the fact that we both know that there is a specialist abattoir in Frome which deals purely with casualty animals, but which has not been able to take any since the crisis began. Moreover, that abattoir has access to a neighbouring incinerator that is also idle.

A few days ago, the owners of the abattoir were told that they could prepare to start work again if they could ensure disposal—which they can, by way of incineration—only to be told subsequently that they could not proceed, as the abattoir is not EU-approved. That is despite the fact that they were working before the crisis began. What, I ask my hon. Friend the Minister of State, does that matter, if the carcases go straight to the incinerator?

I have given my hon. Friend the details of the case. The matter was also raised with me at yesterday's lobby, and I know that many farmers in my constituency who have traditionally used the abattoir would be deeply appreciative if the problem could be sorted out. Heritage is still working with sheep; why should it not work with beef casualties, especially as it does not take any meat that is going into the food chain?

Support for our beef industry is very important at present, and I welcome what my hon. Friend has already said about animals aged just under 30 months. The matter is of great concern, especially to farmers with very few animals.

I could not conclude this part of my speech without mentioning the European Union's totally unreasonable ban on British beef. As one who believes that our future lies at the heart of Europe—based on partnership—I feel strongly that the success of that principle requires mutual support at times of great difficulty. A ban such as this, which has no scientific justification, flies in the face of such a principle. It needs to be lifted, if possible without delay, and we all hope that some progress can be made on Monday. Its imposition has served to undermine not just our own beef market, but other EU beef markets. I hope that the EU will learn its lesson.

Had it not been for the current crisis, the debate would have focused much more closely on what I regard as one of the most important issues with which Europe must grapple: reform of the common agricultural policy. If we are to contemplate, as I believe that we must, further expansion of the European Community, with the inclusion of countries such as Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic—an issue already raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton (Mr. Nicholson)—the reform issues cannot stay on the back burner for ever. The cost of accepting those countries without CAP reform would be prohibitive. I agree with my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister of Agriculture that it is wrong, indeed foolish, to delay such issues until the last moment, a pattern that the EU has always followed when dealing with the CAP. That in itself breeds uncertainty: any such delay does not help farmers to plan their business.

The British agriculture industry is efficient and successful, both at home and in export markets. We see examples of that in our excellent agricultural shows, such as the Royal Bath and West show, which will be held shortly and which my hon. Friend the Minister of State will attend; he will be warmly welcomed. At present, we have an artificial agriculture market that is unsustainable under any concept of the single market. I regard that single market as extremely important. The farmer should be allowed to operate in a world of sensible market forces, with prices determined by consumer demand, and that must be achieved in a balanced countryside environment.

I hope that the Government will work hard to develop the excellent concepts set out in the rural White Paper. That is a comprehensive document, much enhanced by the co-operation in its preparation by both the Country Landowners Association and the National Farmers Union. It is very important for the future of our countryside. It is not a cosmetic exercise; it sets a blueprint for the years ahead. We need to concentrate on that, to ensure that we have a balanced countryside—one in which residents and the agricultural community exist side by side, but in which a reasonable environment is protected.

7.24 pm

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): I wanted to say something about the CAP, but because time is short I will concentrate on the BSE crisis, or calamity. It is costing billions of pounds, and the Government are culpable. The Green Paper "Agriculture in the United Kingdom 1995" drones on about the importance that the Government attach to deregulation, but in the midst of the present crisis they are recognising the importance of regulation.

I speak with some knowledge. Woodhead Brothers in Colne is the largest abattoir in the north-west. Within days of the triggering of the crisis by the Secretary of State for Health on 20 March, it announced 70 redundancies, and 200 people were put on short time. Only some of those jobs have been reinstated. The farming industry has been crucified, and jobs that are at a premium in my neck of the woods have been lost, perhaps irretrievably.

The Food and Drink Federation has told us that losses in that industry are running at £300 million, and rising. The animal feed manufacturing industry is in deep trouble—an industry that is worth £1.7 billion and employs 20,000. What on earth will happen to it? The head boning industry has been vaporised, and the Minister told us yesterday that those in that industry would not be compensated. The slaughtering industry will shrink alarmingly.

The Government commissioned a study from Coopers and Lybrand. It was a non-competitive tender: it went to only one firm of consultants, and cost £250,000. Coopers and Lybrand told the Government that, according to its financial assessment, the eventual closure of between a quarter and a third of abattoirs and cutting plants appeared possible. In three weeks, the crisis has cost the slaughterhouse and cutting plant industry the equivalent of 12 years of pre-crisis profit. The whole panorama of the industry reveals that it is in a state of collapse and near-collapse, but all that we hear from the Government is that it is not their fault. There was a sort of divine visitation; they are not responsible in any way.

Of course the Government are responsible. A briefing sent by MAFF to all hon. Members states:

"The announcement by the Secretary of State for Health on 20 March that there might be a link between BSE and . . . Creutzfeldt Jakob Disease . . . led to a significant loss of . . . confidence in British beef".

So there is a causal connection. The Secretary of State said that there might be a link, and consumer confidence evaporated.

We heard some nonsensical statements from Ministers at the time. I well remember the Minister of Agriculture saying on 20 March:

"I do not believe that this information"—

that is, the information disclosed by the Secretary of State for Health—

"should damage consumer confidence and thus the beef market."—[*Official Report*, 20 March 1996; Vol. 274, c. 387.]

Well, it did: consumer confidence collapsed completely.

As I have said, the Government are totally implicated. Not until June 1989—two and a half years after the identification of the BSE agent—did they summon the wit to ban infected offal from human food. It took another seven months for it to be banned in the entire United Kingdom. Most important, the thing that damaged consumer confidence—I do not know why the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) is smiling. He has abattoirs in his constituency.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Where is Harriet?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We were having a reasonably quiet debate until the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) came in.

Mr. Prentice: If I could return to my theme, I was talking about consumer confidence. The single most important decision that the Government took that irremediably damaged consumer confidence was not to compensate farmers fully for slaughtering BSE cattle until February 1990. For 18 months, therefore, farmers were offered only 50 per cent. of the value of cattle.

We are being told that everything is rosy now and that the abattoirs have been adequately policed. That is true of some abattoirs. People could eat their breakfast off the floor at Woodhead Brothers in Colne. It has eight full-time meat inspection staff and a qualified vet is there permanently. That is not true, however, in all slaughterhouses.

I reminded the Minister earlier that, in answer to a parliamentary question that I tabled, I was told that, in September 1995, 48 per cent. of slaughterhouses visited were found to be in breach of BSE controls designed to keep infected offal from human food. When I raised that matter, the Minister, for the first time, said, "Some of that percentage has to do with faulty paperwork." That was absolutely bizarre.

It is not just Labour Members who think that the Government are completely incompetent and totally culpable: the farming press, traditionally supportive of the Conservative interest, believe that too. On 10 May, the *Farming News* opinion column said:

"Mr. Hogg continues to dither. His country publicly humiliated, his industry on its knees, his ministry rudderless, his agencies engulfed in damage control, he now has no claim whatever on office. It is time for him to own up, apologise and go."

The *Farmers Weekly* opinion column says:

"This state of confusion"

in the Government

"is inexcusable."

A *Farming News* headline said "Industry in chaos" and on 10 May, *Farmers Guardian*—it is all a bit dated now because events are moving so rapidly, but, ordinarily, quoting from the *Farmers Guardian*, which comes out every Friday, would be enough—said that the only way to rescue the industry was for the cattle industry

"to show that it is squeaky clean",

which it must be.

Information is just dribbling out. Every 24 hours, we have a new statement. How can people possibly have confidence in the Government when they have that drip feed of new information? Yesterday, we were all astonished to hear that, in six weeks' time, there would be new cold storage capacity. Today, I received a letter, dated 15 May, from the Minister saying that the Government had

"secured extra cold storage capacity".

[Mr. Prentice]

We are now told from the Dispatch Box that it will happen not in six weeks, but in three weeks, which is astonishing.

The same letter told us—it certainly told me for the first time—that only "EC approved" abattoirs would be used, but a large number of the UK's abattoirs are not EC approved. The Government have given 150 abattoirs derogations to continue slaughtering animals, even though they are not EC approved. Clearly, if we want to get the European Union on side, it makes sense—I agree with the Government—to slaughter animals only in EC-approved abattoirs.

In the same letter—this took my breath away—we were told that slaughtering would start in the designated abattoirs

"in the week beginning 27 May".

The ink was barely dry on the letter, dated yesterday, yet, as I understand it, slaughtering has already started.

Some key outstanding issues have to be dealt with. The farming industry is concerned, as I am, that there is no certain match between the slaughtering and rendering industries to ensure that the slaughtering industry does not march in advance of the rendering industry's capacity to slaughter. The industry wanted co-ordination. I should like the Minister to comment on that.

I should like to say one final thing because time is pressing. Will the Minister—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Time is up.

7.34 pm

Sir Richard Body (Holland with Boston): I am glad to say that I no longer have to declare an interest as a beef producer, but I should like to follow what the hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) has said because he has overlooked the history of the bovine spongiform encephalopathy saga. It means going back a few years, but I will do it because, if we forget our history, we are in danger of making the same mistakes again.

BSE is the inevitable and direct consequence of forcing farmers on to a high-input, high-output system. Long ago, when I went to serve my pupillage on a dairy farm, we hardly used any of these compounds, except in winter: it was not necessary. Farmers, however, are governed by the price mechanism and, when that mechanism is controlled by the Government or by Brussels, farmers become like puppets on a string. They either have to work the system, and therefore go on increasing their inputs and outputs, or get out.

In 1975, I got out of one sector of farming because I realised that there were considerable dangers in compounds. I remind the hon. Member for Pendle that, in 1975, we Conservative Members had no ministerial responsibility. May I remind the House what happened at that point?

According to my records, from 1960 to 1972, the price of feeding stuffs remained constant at about £24 a tonne—it hardly went up or down in any one year. That was amazing because we had a high inflation rate during that time. Prices, however, remained the same. The reason was that many small compound manufacturers that were producing a quality product were driven out of business by four or five major combines, which had the purchasing power to buy cereals in the world market at a competitive price from Argentina, the United States, Canada and Australia.

In 1972, we had to go over to a system of import levies to prepare for entry into the Common Market. The price of the feeding stuffs that I used then went up from £24 to three times as much. That had a devastating effect on all of us in livestock sector, who had been pushed into a higher-input, higher-output system. At that point, about 60 per cent. of our on-costs was in feed compounds.

Soon afterwards, when we joined the European Community, a French firm of feeding stuff manufacturers started to come into our market. They were selling feeding stuffs that contained cheap protein, which came from offal from French slaughterhouses, a practice that the French had been carrying on for a long time. It is staggering, but they had been doing so long before 1972. We had to follow suit because we had to bring down the price of our feeding stuffs. We could not bring down the price of cereals because of import levies, which had forced the price up unrealistically. The protein that we had used up to then—fish meal or soya bean—was eliminated and we resorted to offal.

Rudolf Steiner warned us long ago in 1922 that if beef is fed to a cow it will go mad. There was nothing original in him saying that. The Chinese knew that years before. I hope that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will not mind me saying that if you or I have too much to drink, the toxicity goes to our head. I regret to say that we behave rather like cows with BSE; we stagger about. The Chinese have always said that if a creature cannot digest what it eats, the toxicity will go to the head.

Those in power did not seem to appreciate that at the time, but some of us raised the point. Some of us in farming said to the then Ministry of Agriculture that we ought to be allowed to know the ingredients of every bag of feeding stuff that comes on to our farms. We said that we should be able to see exactly what was in it and that there should be regulations to that effect. Such regulations never came into effect then.

Mr. Morley: No.

Sir Richard Body: I hope that the hon. Gentleman is not being smug. Conservative Members did not have responsibility in 1975.

Mr. Morley: I remember the Select Committee on Agriculture making that very recommendation in 1989, and it was rejected by the Government.

Sir Richard Body: That was 1989, a few years on.

On our farm, I made the decision, as did a number of others, that we would not use those feeding stuffs because they were part and parcel of a higher input-output ratio that was thoroughly dangerous.

Something similar is going to happen with some other livestock, which is why I wholeheartedly applaud what my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Mr. Rathbone) said. We must have contingency plans for any similar events in future because agriculture cannot tolerate more of such chaos.

If the hon. Member for Pendle wants to throw stones at my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench, he should remember what some of us were saying about

20 years ago. Sadly, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food at the time failed to respond. It continued to fail to respond when the National Farmers Union also pressed it to introduce regulations so that farmers could have the information to which they were entitled and know exactly what they were feeding their animals.

Surely we have a weapon in our hands to do something about the matter. For more than 20 years, we have been a major net contributor to the European Community's budget, along with Germany. It is true that others are joining us now. We ought to use our power. If as taxpayers we are to be required to pay more for the decision taken in Brussels, which is thoroughly wrong, I see no reason why we should not claw back, and deduct some of the money that we give them every year. Imagine what the Spanish, Italian or Greek Parliaments would be saying and doing if they had such power, which of course they have not. Now that Mr. Chirac has left—we did not want to say anything disagreeable in his presence—I do not see why we should not be a little tougher and behave like the French would in such circumstances.

I remind my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Robinson) that we are not EU partners; we are competitors. The hon. Member for Angus, East (Mr. Welsh) was absolutely right. Our beef has been extremely popular in France, Germany and elsewhere. The trouble is that it has been too popular and has been displacing their own beef. That is why they consider our beef a danger to their market. They are competitors. I do not see how we can be partners and competitors at the same time. It seems a complete contradiction. In the face of such competition, we should talk a little more toughly than we have up to now.

I do not want to pre-empt what my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary is going to say, but I hope that she will not allow the Opposition to get away with their comments because they must share the responsibility—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

7.45 pm

Mr. Harry Barnes (North–East Derbyshire): I welcome this debate since I was among those Members who called for a debate on BSE at business questions. Unfortunately, the debate on BSE is mixed up with other matters and we cannot entirely concentrate on it. The debate is entitled "Common Agricultural Policy and other agricultural issues". BSE is just another agricultural issue, and it interferes considerably with other parts of the debate. Such a mixed arrangement is entirely unsatisfactory.

I am a member of the Select Committee on European Legislation, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke–on–Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson). Members of that Committee unanimously recommended a debate in the House on a number of documents, including the annual review associated with the common agricultural policy, and that it should be followed by a vote. The Government chose instead to push the documents and the vote into European Standing Committee A, where the matters have already been dealt with, and merely tagged the documents on to this debate so that they could be raised on the Floor of the House. We cannot discuss the CAP in the way in which the European Legislation Committee wanted. The opportunity to vote on the matters and table an amendment has been transferred to European Standing Committee A.

Quite disgracefully, the Leader of the House said in business questions today that the vote on the documents on the Floor of the House will take place tomorrow because the decision taken in Committee has to come before the House. We shall therefore have the opportunity to table an amendment and vote tomorrow—not after this full debate, and not in the presence of many Opposition Members. Matters that are normally moved formally will merely go through on the nod. That seems quite an unreasonable manipulation of the arrangements of the House. We should have had perhaps a day's debate in which to consider the documents, push the matter to a vote and address the important subject of the common agricultural policy, which was raised only as a side issue by the Minister of State.

This House is something of a word factory. It produces all sorts of reports, records, minutes and other material. Among that is the work of the European Legislation Committee and the Standing Committees, which does not often grab a great deal of attention in the House. At the moment there are insufficient arrangements for us to deal fully and properly with European matters, which include the important subject of the operation and the costs of the common agricultural policy.

In the time available to me I shall refer briefly to some of the documents placed before us, whose inclusion allows us to mention such matters. But on the whole they are just a great bundle of documents that largely pass us by, and have simply been tagged on to the debate.

The major document is the 14th report of the Select Committee on European Legislation, which is scathing—much more so than the Minister who opened the debate—about the problems within the CAP. It even claims that the CAP does not operate within the "spirit of the objectives" of the treaty proposals, and lists the elements of those proposals, backed up with the wording in the treaty. The measures were supposed

> "to increase agricultural productivity . . . to ensure a fair standard of living for the agricultural community . . . to stabilise markets . . . to assure the availability of supplies . . . to ensure that supplies reach consumers at reasonable prices".

The report is full of illustrations of massive shortcomings in all those areas. We should have the opportunity to get our teeth into the details in a full debate, with full contributions from both Front Benches. Then we should be given the chance to do what we can all do in the House—to vote, and show how we stand on the issues.

Although this is a two-day debate, and a 10-minute limit has been imposed on all our speeches because of the number of Members who want to speak, only a relatively small number of us will be able to speak, compared with the total number of Members of Parliament. But what every Member can do is to go through the Lobby to express his or her views, even if he or she has not had the opportunity to be involved in the debate. We should be given that opportunity.

The European Union is full of vast areas of problem and difficulty, some of which were mentioned by the hon. Member for Holland with Boston (Sir R. Body). Undoubtedly, if there were time, there would be more condemnation of the way in which the Commission and the Council of Ministers operate, of the secret cabal that makes decisions for us, and of the lack of parliamentary accountability.

[Mr. Harry Barnes]

However, there is one EU body to which we often need to pay attention, because it helps us to understand what is taking place and gives us a lot of ammunition. I am talking about the Court of Auditors. Although that organisation is now considered to have feet of clay, because it has recently been found to spend too much money on its own affairs—perhaps we need a Court of Auditors report on the Court of Auditors—its reports on expenditure and the results of that expenditure, including some of the counter-expenditure and diseconomies that arise from many of the EU's activities, are extremely valuable.

Three of the documents before us show that the Select Committee has made considerable use of the Court of Auditors' reports. One of the documents, about the sheep and goat regime, says:

"The Court of Auditors Report points to the need for a fundamental review of the effectiveness of the arrangements in sheepmeat and goat-meat market organisations . . . In view of these cogent criticisms of the regime, it is disappointing that the Commission does not appear to be willing to undertake a more fundamental review and that the UK Government does not appear to recognise the underlying concerns of the Court of Auditors on the effectiveness of the present arrangements".

Time is catching up with me, and I would like to quote from two other reports, which are scathing about expenditure and failure in agricultural policy. One is about the development of the Portuguese agricultural arrangements after accession; before that there was no proper system in place to check what had been done. The other report is about the European agricultural guidance and guarantee fund, and reveals great problems in Greece, Spain and Italy concerning expenditure on produce such as fruit and vegetables.

I do not have time to do that, but I must point out that the Select Committee is drawn from the widest range of Members that it is possible to find in the House. It includes Euro-sceptics and Euro-fanatics, and they are at it meeting after meeting, especially the Conservatives. Therefore—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

7.55 pm

Sir Gerard Vaughan (Reading, East): I wish to speak only briefly—I hope more briefly than the 10 minutes that I am allowed. The hon. Member for North–East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) will understand if I do not follow the line that he took, but I warmly welcome the support expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Holland with Boston (Sir R. Body).

As the ban continues, not only does it become clearer and clearer that it is unwarranted, but it is beginning to appear more and more as simply an aspect of a trade war being conducted to the advantage of other parts of Europe. I agree with what my hon. Friend said about that, and also with what he said about the attitudes of some members of the Labour party in the 1970s. That was not a helpful period for farming and agricultural policy.

I welcome the Minister of State's clear statement. I also congratulate the intervention board, in my constituency, which has taken on extra staff to work late into the night to get the administrative details cleared up as quickly as possible. The whole House should recognise that fact.

I shall raise two administrative problems, both of which I have written to the Minister about. The first concerns people who produce by-products. In my constituency is a company that treats animal stomachs, extracts the rennet enzymes and exports them. As a result of the crisis, it has had to close the factory and make 20 workers redundant. That is a great pity, and I know that the Minister understands the situation and has undertaken to investigate it. The point is that such people get no compensation of any kind. We have lost a valuable small scientific organisation, and there is little excuse for that.

My other concern is about an abattoir in a neighbouring constituency. When the approved list first came out, it was not included, but on Monday it was added to the list. The company reassured its staff, because it had been told that the abattoir would be able to continue in business. On Wednesday, the renderers—I know that that subject has come up before in the debate—told the company that they would not be able to accept any of its cull cattle for rendering. The company had long-standing contracts with the renderers, all of which are now cancelled. Now it does not know where it stands. There seems to be great confusion, which I hope the Minister will find a way of resolving.

On that note, I shall finish—well within the time limit, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

7.58 pm

Mr. Michael J. Martin (Glasgow, Springburn): Like the hon. Member for Reading, East (Sir G. Vaughan), I shall be brief. I too want to talk about a problem in my constituency, wherein lies the Glasgow meat market. I received a telephone call from a Mrs. Fyfe who, with six other operators in the Glasgow meat market, ran a head boners company. I cannot recall the exact date and do not have all the details with me, but, on a Thursday evening quite recently, the Scottish Office faxed Mrs. Fyfe and the other operators to tell her that she could no longer operate her business. She has run a company for more than 20 years and employed five to six people.

That lady has had to leave her business, stay at her home and lay off the workers who have been loyal to her. She has a very serious problem, which I ask the Minister to consider. The banks have tried to be understanding, but they want repayment of any overdrafts with interest. The Government cannot encourage people to set up small businesses and yet treat them in such a fashion. I know that the Minister will say that everyone cannot be compensated. Surely we must consider people who have operated legitimate businesses for over 20 years and caused no trouble to anyone, but who are told an a Thursday night that they must shut up shop and finish.

It is disgraceful that the Scottish Office Minister, Lord Lindsay, has written to the traders in that association and said that there is absolutely nothing that can be done for them. The irony is that Mrs. Fyfe was told by a Scottish Office official that, if she wants to, she can stay in business by buying and cutting meat from the Republic of Ireland or from France.

We are in a terrible situation when hon. Members and Ministers are saying that we have the best beef in the world, yet telling people that they cannot stay in business unless they buy products from France or from the Republic of Ireland. It is a scandal. There is a serious and immediate problem that the Minister must tackle. I hope

that she will pass on my concern to the responsible Scottish Office officials, and tell them that men and women such as Mrs. Fyfe should be looked after in a proper manner.

8.1 pm

Mr. Graham Riddick (Colne Valley): The beef crisis is an utter disaster for the farming industry in general and for the beef industry in particular. There is no doubt about that at all; but let me tell the House that I am still eating beef—of course, only so long as it is British beef. I can also tell the House that, in the week that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health made his fateful statement to the House, my wife went out and bought a great piece of beef at our local butcher. It was delicious, and I am sure that it was perfectly safe to eat. We can all support the British beef industry by eating as much beef as we possibly can.

I should like to congratulate Asda on the patriotic and supportive move that it made yesterday, when it made it clear that it would sell only British beef. I regret that some Labour Members have not been as supportive of the industry as they might have been, and appear to have supported the European ban. The hon. Member for Edinburgh, East (Dr. Strang) said in a press release on 22 March:

"a temporary cessation in the movement of British cattle, beef and beef products into the continent may be wise at this time."

That is clearly very unhelpful, and I think that British farmers are entitled to say, "Thanks a lot."

On 3 April, I attended a dinner of 450 farmers, their families, butchers and other people associated with the meat trade. There was obviously enormous concern among those present. I made a speech and attempted to avoid making any party political points—*[Interruption.]* Yes; I avoided making any party political points during that speech. I must report to the House that one of the farmers who spoke referred to the irresponsible comments made in the House by the hon. Member for Peckham (Ms Harman). There was real and genuine anger about her approach to the matter and her attempt to make party political capital out of the industry's misfortune. So it is fair to say that, as well as being unwelcome at a meeting of the Peckham branch of the National Union of Teachers, she would be unwelcome at any meeting of the National Farmers Union.

I suggested at that meeting on 3 April that the common agricultural policy was not in the best interests of British farmers, and I received a loud round of applause. I find it humiliating to see British Ministers and officials going cap in hand—or fedora on head—to Brussels, imploring our European partners to allow us to sell our beef abroad.

The British people have supported our membership of the European Union through the years because they believe in free trade in Europe and in co-operating with our European partners. Now, we discover that we have ceded powers to the EU that allow it to ban exports of our beef not only to other EU countries but, unbelievably, to the rest of the world as well. I have little doubt that European Agriculture Ministers' judgments and actions have been coloured by the potential benefits that they have seen for their home farming industries. That has, of course, backfired on them in practice, because their beef industries are suffering as much as or more than our own.

I am dismayed at the failure of EU veterinarians at yesterday's meeting to lift the ban, even partially. The reality, of course, is that if a concession to Britain had been made yesterday, the main ban would still be in place today. Diplomacy has failed. Playing the game like English gentlemen has failed. If the EU does not lift the ban, particularly the worldwide ban, on the sale of British beef, I believe that we should stop all our transfer payments to the EU until such time as the situation has changed. If that suggestion is too strong for Ministers and for the Government, I make an alternative one. If the Government believe that the worldwide ban on sales of British beef is illegal, let us behave as if we believe that it is illegal and proceed as if it does not exist.

I should like to see the Government working to lift the ban in countries outside the European Union. To that end, I suggest that we should target those countries that have been good customers in the recent past. We should actively promote the sale of British beef to non-EU countries. We should advertise all the safety measures that we have taken to make British beef the safest in the world. I believe that we could generate some sales in non-EU countries, and the ball would then be in the court of the European Commission to take us to the European Court of Justice—if it dared to do that.

My message to my hon. Friend the Minister and to the Government is that we should be proactive in trying to counter this outrageous worldwide ban. I have been talking about exports. It is fair to point out that exporters of British beef believe that they should be included in the compensation scheme, because, as my hon. Friend the Minister of State said earlier in the debate, some shipments of British beef are being returned. Ministers clearly must consider that matter.

One interesting aspect of the BSE debate is that, at the time it blew up, we were told that the European Union would contribute about 70 per cent. of the costs of necessary measures, but that will not happen at all. The figures supplied to me by the Library show that, over the next three years, the cost of BSE counter-measures will be £2.4 billion, whereas the EU's net contribution will be £510 million, or 25 per cent., which is hardly the 70 per cent. or 80 per cent. that we were led to expect. The EU has, of course, craftily deducted much of the cost of BSE counter-measures from the UK's rebate.

We are all aware that there is a serious backlog in the culling programme. Other hon. Members have referred to the problems. The programme was slow to get off the ground, but the signs are that, this week, some progress has been made. I shall not dwell on the problems because I know that my hon. Friend the Minister and all the Agriculture Ministers, whom I do not criticise for a moment, are aware of the problems associated with the culling programme. It is a massive programme and there are bound to be problems when one tries to implement something of that sort in a short space of time.

One specific problem is that of slower maturing breeds such as Highland cattle, which reach their prime after 30 months. There is clearly an overwhelming case for making an exception to the 30-month limit for such cattle. My hon. Friend the Minister of State talked about consulting on that matter. It is not consultation that we need, but action. We all know that it is the right thing to do, so let us take some action on that front.

[Mr. Graham Riddick]

A number of people within the meat processing industry have expressed concern to me that there is scope for some middlemen to make unreasonable profits by handling carcases being moved from abattoirs to renderers. That is something that Ministers also need to consider.

Lastly, the Government should reiterate at every opportunity that the various measures taken make British beef as safe as any beef in the world to eat. The incidence of CJD is as high in France, America and Holland as in Britain. An awful lot of the problem is about perception. Ironically, it would be in the interests of our European partners to lift the ban. That act in itself would boost public confidence in beef in all European countries. However, sadly, I am not confident that that will happen. In the meantime, I shall continue to eat British beef.

8.11 pm

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): It is perhaps odd for three Labour Members of Parliament from one borough to speak in one debate. It is the first time that the three Rotherham Members have spoken in a single debate. I enjoyed the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth (Mr. Hardy), who dealt with some passion with the problems that the CAP presents. My hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron) asked the Government to respond—I address my remarks here to the Minister—to the particular scandal of the CAP subsidy for tobacco production and, worse than that, for the massive export of the most dangerous form of tobacco to the third world.

One of the ironies of today's debate has been the attempt by Ministers to blame the Opposition for the crisis. We heard an example of that in the speech of the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Mr. Riddick). Here we have a Government who have been in office for 17 years and seek to blame everyone else under the sun because it ain't working and it certainly is hurting, as beef farmers can testify.

The signals have been clear. My borough of Rotherham banned beef months, if not a year or more, ago. So did Westminster council, which will normally undertake any measure to promote the Conservative cause. Where were Conservative Ministers when those initiatives were taken? I had handed to me not half an hour ago a parliamentary reply from the junior Agriculture Minister. I asked which countries had imposed a ban on British beef since 1987. The list included, as the Minister will know, the United States—our great ally. I wait for the calls for retaliation against America. It also included Saudi Arabia—that great source of finance for the Conservative party and the right hon. and learned Member for Putney (Mr. Mellor). I wait for calls for retaliation against Saudi Arabia. It also included Commonwealth countries such as Canada and Malaysia, and Switzerland—the favourite holiday destination of the former Prime Minister. What action are we taking against the non-EU Swiss? It even included Hong Kong, for God's sake, which belongs to us for another year. Are we going to fire Patten or tell him to import and buy British beef? That is the absurdity of this debate.

The Government knew for month after month and year after year that the crisis was coming, and they did nothing. Eventually the Secretary of State for Health made the correct announcement and the Minister of Agriculture responded. Of course, one could blame my hon. Friend the shadow Health Secretary and say that if she had said nothing, there would have been no crisis. Ministers and Conservative Members know how absurd that is. Since the moment when the crisis became a European and international crisis, nothing has happened.

The charge that I lay against the Government is one of a lack of imagination or sense of history. For thousands of years, when there has been a crisis, one has had to sacrifice animals. As the Bible tells us, Abraham had to do it. In a sense, what the Bible tells us is often valid for today. So dithery, so uncertain and so insecure is the hand on the tiller of state, the prime ministerial hand that guides our nation—he is eating his beef tonight with President Chirac and good luck to him—that nothing was done. If the Prime Minister had seized the crisis and understood it and if Ministers were not so inexperienced and incompetent and had forced the Cabinet to take action, perhaps we would not be where we are today.

I wish to set the crisis in the wider context of world agricultural development. There is good news for Britain and not necessarily bad news for Europe in what is happening around the world. We are entering a period of considerable demand for agricultural products. Socrates—that well-known new Labour philosopher—once remarked that the politician who does not know the price of a bushel of wheat has no business to be in politics.

Mr. Gary Streeter (Plymouth, Sutton): How much is it then?

Mr. MacShane: I will tell the hon. Gentleman, if he thinks that I can make a remark like that without checking what the price is. I am not a Conservative Member of Parliament, after all. The price of a bushel of wheat on the world market has doubled from some $3.50 to more than $7 in the past 12 months. The reason for that is that every Chinaman wants to eat pork. To produce a pound of pork one has to feed a pig 5 lb of grain. Across the world, there is an increasing demand for agricultural products produced here in the north—northern Europe and north America.

We should orientate our agricultural policy in such a way that we put Britain in pole position to take advantage of that. If we are to do that, we cannot stand alone. We shall require co-operation with our European partners. There, of course, the crisis hits home—the crisis not of beef, tragic as that is, but the crisis inside the Conservative party, with the rise to the fore of the Euro-phobes such as the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Thames (Mr. Lamont) and perhaps future hon. Member for Harrogate, and the right hon. Member for South Thanet and Saudi Arabia (Mr. Aitken), who now insist that we withdraw from Europe. The Euro-phobes are unwilling to understand that if we are to have a successful agricultural policy in Britain, we need a successful one for Europe.

If we are—as I hope—to enlarge the European Community, we shall have to work much harder to develop a successful agriculture policy. Some 24 per cent. of the active working population of Poland are farmers of one sort or another, such as small peasant farmers and smallholders. They want to sign up to the CAP, which they see as a wonderful meal ticket from the rest of western Europe. That will not work. The CAP needs

reform but we cannot wipe out 24 per cent. of the working population of Poland overnight—Germany and Russia have both tried it. The House will not achieve it simply by proclaiming the necessary changes to reform the CAP and seeking to bring in those countries with a far higher proportion of their working population in agriculture than we have.

To enlarge Europe, the CAP must go and, for that, we must have a policy of co-operation with our European Union partners. It must be an opt-in policy, and not an opt-out policy. We need a policy that gets rid of the fraud and corruption to which Conservative Members have rightly referred. Our ruling party does not know whether it wants to be a part of Europe or not. Until the crisis of the failure of the ruling party in this country to co-operate in Europe is solved, we shall continue to flounder with an agriculture policy that does not make sense. The policy is reactive, has let down our people and has not served the interests of agriculture.

8.20 pm

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): The hon. Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron) spoke about the problems associated with tobacco in the European Union. I am sorry that he is not here to hear my comments, because he researched his subject very well and gave a lot of facts and figures about the injurious effect that tobacco undoubtedly—it has been proved—has on human health. However, he did not draw the obvious analogy between tobacco and beef. Beef has been banned by the European Community on the pretext that it has an injurious effect on human health, but there is not a shred of evidence that BSE causes CJD. If the European Union wants to ban agricultural products because of their health implications, I suggest that it should, perhaps, have started with tobacco and left beef to the end.

In his opening speech, my hon. Friend the Minister of State made some reassuring remarks about the CAP. He cheered me, because I thought that there was much more realism in his comments about the CAP than has been evident during some of our previous debates, but even after the most radical and drastic reform, the CAP will continue to be bureaucratic, hugely expensive and wide open to fraud. If anyone doubts the truth of that, I invite them to study the history of the CAP since we joined. Every reform has increased the amount of bureaucracy, and, as every farmer knows, form filling. Every reform has increased the overall cost of the CAP to the taxpayer. Every reform, in my opinion, has made fraud the best paying crop of all.

Worst of all—this is a serious point for this Parliament in Westminster—there is little or nothing that the House can do about that. Opposition Members must realise that whether a motion on agriculture or fisheries is won or lost in this Chamber changes nothing. Parliament has no sovereignty in the matter. A fortnight ago, I invited my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister of Agriculture to assert the sovereignty of this Parliament by ordering licences to be issued for the export of beef to non-EC countries. For reasons that I understand—and which I hope the House will begin to understand—he chose to avoid answering that question because the simple answer is that he does not have that power any longer.

Sovereignty passed from this Chamber to another place when we signed the treaty of Rome. Ministers know that—that is why my right hon. and learned Friend did not answer my question. Labour also knows that that is true, despite the fact that, for purely party political reasons, it is taunting the Government for failing to give the House an opportunity to vote on a substantive motion tonight.

Sadly, the public, farmers and fishermen are only now waking up to the fact that their elected representatives—their Members of Parliament—have no power or authority in these matters. Their votes are practically worthless. The only vote that counts is the one passed in secret in the Council of Ministers in Brussels.

I want now to concentrate on what can be done to improve the beef situation. I want to make suggestions that I hope my hon. Friend the Minister will recognise as being helpful and constructive. I want to refer, first, to the speech that I made in the House on 28 March, when I expressed concern about

"the time scale against which some of the measures will be implemented."—[*Official Report*, 28 March 1996; Vol. 274, c. 1245.]

I must tell my hon. Friend the Minister that those concerns have not lessened today.

There is an overwhelming sense of frustration in the industry that, until this very week, no significant movement of culled cattle through the system had taken place—and serious cash flow problems have developed. Complaints have been made about the lack of co-ordination and—particularly about the intervention board—a lack of co-operation. When she winds up, perhaps my hon. Friend the Minister will tell the House why, relatively speaking, so little British beef has gone into intervention.

May I respectfully suggest to my hon. Friend that, if her Department is finding it difficult to get things moving, it should consider delegating some of the responsibilities to the industry's own body, the Meat and Livestock Commission? The House will know that that body is fully representative of all sections of the industry, and it might appreciate an opportunity to do something positive for the industry that might dumbfound its critics.

Many right hon. and hon. Members have learned during the past eight weeks that the meat industry is more complicated than they realised. It has many more facets than people realised at the outset of the crisis. It is difficult for Ministers and civil servants to comprehend the full import of what has happened to the industry. By involving practitioners in the trade more closely, we could make progress more quickly, as is evidenced by the successful meeting that Ministers had yesterday with the Licensed Animal Slaughters and Salvage Association, as a result of which casualty cattle will be removed from farms tomorrow and the backlog will start to be reduced.

I wrote to my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister of Agriculture on 30 March and 11 April to suggest that, among other things, we take certain measures that put British beef beyond reproach. First, I would like to recommend that beef subsidies should in future be concentrated on specialist beef herds. It is wrong for beef subsidies to be paid to a by-product of the dairy industry, and Ministers will be as aware as anyone how difficult it has been to explain to the general public that beef does not come from cows. If we made a greater attempt to emphasise the importance of the specialist beef herds and give them all possible help, that would help build up a sound industry for the future.

[Mr. Christopher Gill]

I recommend that Ministers support the EU hormone ban. I know that, previously, they have not done so, and I understand why, but we have gone beyond the point where science alone is sufficient to restore public confidence. It would be commendable to join our European partners in that ban.

As animal proteins have been banned from animal feeding stuffs, we should ban the use of mechanically recovered meat in meat products for human consumption. If that means that Brussels paté, for example, disappears from supermarket shelves, so be it.

I recommend that culled livestock be slaughtered in designated abattoirs. My hon. Friend the Minister said that the action of Somerfield was regrettable. I take the opposite view. I believe that it was right, because it is the customer. In my parlance, the customer is right. It has also, sensibly, established a meaningful audit trail to the source of its meat. That will go a long way to restore public confidence. It would be a great mistake to underestimate the contribution that major retailers can make to the restoration of public confidence. We should congratulate companies such as Wimpy and Asda on declaring their confidence in British beef and urge other retailers to follow their commendable example.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Morris): Order.

8.31 pm

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian): As ever, I must declare my interest as a partner in a family farming business. However, my main interest is that of the 68,000 electors of my constituency who all consume food—I hope they are still consuming beef—and the 200-odd farmers there.

There is much that I would like to say, and which should be said, about the details and principles of the CAP, but like other hon. Members I shall concentrate on the beef crisis. Briefly, the CAP is expensive and riddled with absurdities ranging from the set-aside scheme to the £800 million annual subsidy for the production of tobacco to poison our citizens.

The CAP has signally failed to safeguard rural employment in the European Community. Far too often, it funds a higher standard of living for bigger farmers who should, theoretically, use the money for employing people on their farms—but that frequently does not happen. That is why there is rampant unemployment in rural constituencies. We must move away from production subsidies and concentrate on incentives to employ people in the countryside and to protect the rural environment. I say that as a loyal and long-standing enthusiast for the European Union, unlike the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill).

I am bitterly disappointed to have to return to the House to discuss, again, the BSE crisis. Like the hon. Member for Ludlow, I took part in the debate on 28 March. I thought that the House gave the Minister of Agriculture a clear direction to face up to his responsibilities to the UK beef industry, and to consumers at home and abroad, by taking all necessary steps to restore confidence in beef by making absolutely certain that any meat product that could be contaminated with BSE is kept off the market and by implementing policies to eradicate the disease from the British cattle herd. We also called for an effective emergency programme to support the industry.

That was seven weeks ago, but we are little further forward. People are still worried about the possible connection between BSE and CJD. More local authorities—including, sadly, my local authority—have stopped serving beef in school dinners. More evidence has emerged about the sloppy enforcement of feed controls in recent years. The implementation of the slaughter scheme for cattle over 30 months old has been shambolic. We are still waiting for proper access to the intervention system to clear the logjam of cattle and carcases. The European Union ban is still in force.

The situation was critical seven weeks ago, but it is worse now. The 600,000 jobs in the UK beef industry are in dire peril, and many have already gone. It is bad enough that the Government failed to take BSE seriously when it was first discovered in 1986, but it is downright intolerable that they are making such slow progress now that we have a full-scale crisis. Their attitude is neatly summarised by the foolish car sticker slogan, which was probably drafted by the hon. Member for Ludlow or his friends, that said:

"Stuff the EU—eat British beef".

Such people are under the happy illusion that the collapse of the mainland European market for beef was caused by the ban on the import of British beef. The British Government have been stuffing the EU for years with vetoes, opt-outs and idiotic abuse. There was always a risk that that would provoke retaliation. I fear that that is exactly what is happening. The export ban is not the fundamental problem, but a result of the fundamental problem, which is the lack of consumer confidence in beef following the announcement by the Secretary of State for Health that BSE and CJD may be connected.

As other hon. Members have said, many countries' bans predate the EU export ban. Our allies, the United States, banned British beef months ago. Russia, Libya and all manner of other countries have banned it, and that had nothing to do with the EU ban. The market for beef in Italy, France and Germany has collapsed even with the ban on British beef imports. There is no guarantee that the situation would not get worse in those markets if the ban were lifted before everyone is confident that the Government have got their act together controlling BSE in Britain. Commissioner Fischler acknowledged that when he stated publicly that he was confident about the safety of British beef, but he defended the ban because of the risk of making things worse in the market.

All the blustering about trade wars and litigation in the European court misses the point. We cannot force people in Germany, Italy, France, America, Russia, Libya or anywhere else to eat British beef, but we can and should take effective steps to convince them that our beef is a high-quality product from extensive farms with the highest welfare and husbandry standards and that we have taken all necessary steps to remove any health risk from BSE. As a Scot, since we have had only 70 cases of BSE in Scotland this year, I say that it should be comparatively easy to complete the job in Scotland and Northern Ireland so that we can give those assurances to people both at home and abroad. That is how to begin to work our way out of this mess.

In passing, I may say that if Scotland had had its own Parliament with direct control over the devolved powers of the Scottish Office Agriculture, Environment and Fisheries Department, it would have been open to us to take much more urgent action in view of the importance of the beef sector to the Scottish economy. All the 21,500 jobs that depend on that sector are at risk. Just as the Irish Republic has virtually eradicated BSE by taking drastic action to control feed standards and cattle movements, a Scottish administration within the UK could have adopted similar policies. That is hypothetical, but it shows what could have been achieved in the nations and regions of a decentralised Britain.

Meanwhile, we are left with the legacy of the Minister of Agriculture and his recent predecessors. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East (Dr. Strang) spoke about the deplorable under-enforcement of BSE controls in slaughterhouses and rendering plants and the lackadaisical approach to feed controls in general before March. That procrastination over many years by the Government led directly and inexorably to the present crisis. Only now, as we face a full-scale disaster, have the Government started to implement the controls effectively and to give proper priority to research.

In conclusion, this has been a disgraceful story of neglect that has probably created, and certainly aggravated, a serious cattle disease and, worse, may have caused a human health risk. It has brought an important industry to the brink of disaster in the United Kingdom. As ever, however, no one in the Government is prepared to accept responsibility. The Government are not even prepared to face a vote on a substantive motion on the issue in the House tonight. They are shirking their responsibility, and I submit that the House has a duty to hold them to account.

8.38 pm

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): I join the hon. Member for East Lothian (Mr. Home Robertson) in declaring an interest as a partner in a family farm, which happens to have no cattle on it, but which I hope gives me a certain qualification to speak in the debate.

First, I must echo what the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) said, because this is a debate about the common agricultural policy. Without doubt, the CAP has changed significantly from the state that it was in five years ago. One of the most remarkable developments has been the disappearance of surpluses and the change in world prices. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman is right, and it is due to the conversion of the Chinese to eating pork and drinking beer—China has been a substantial export market for British malting barley—or whether it is due to global warming. Whatever the cause may be, many people I know hold the view that the original concept of the CAP—to protect the security of supply of food for Europe—may be taking on meaning again as the world of surpluses now seems unlikely.

One of the interesting comments in this debate was made by my right hon. and learned Friend yesterday. He said that, when he became Minister of Agriculture, he recognised that it was a good time to become Minister of Agriculture. As we know, a week is a long time in politics, and other things can happen. Undoubtedly, of all the industries in which the feel-good factor—a phrase I hate—existed, it was justified in agriculture. There was a revival in investment and in purchases. The whole infrastructure of agriculture has been transformed, with the possible exception of the pig industry and poultry. Otherwise, agriculture was generally in a happy state and faced encouraging prospects. Then we had this drama.

I note that the hon. Member for Rotherham, as a journalist, managed to write the *Daily Mirror* out of the script for its contribution to provoking the crisis. Although hon. Members and the Government are pretty inured to the concept of leaks, that newspaper bears a heavy responsibility for the front-page story it ran, which provoked a statement from my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister and the situation that we now face. I know what some right hon. and hon. Members would have said if a Minister had not come to the Dispatch Box that day after the leak.

The situation that we now face is serious. I agreed with the hon. Member for Monklands, East (Mrs. Liddell) when she said that it was too serious to try to make party political points out of it. I think that she lost that page of her speech as she moved on, but she was right to say so and should have stuck to it.

The situation is tough and the Government made it their first responsibility to try to save the industry and ensure that it survives. It is with no pleasure that I must say that, if some of the associated activities and industries suffer, at least if the industry survives they will have an opportunity to return, and such activities will be able to resume. There is no way that that could have been avoided unless we were prepared to underwrite a massive expenditure programme. The hon. Member for Monklands, East said that the Government were adopting some sort of free-market approach to the problem. I understand that the extra public expenditure is likely to be not less than £1 billion a year. That seems a strange version of a free-market solution.

We must fight, and I support my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister to the hilt in his noble efforts to try to get the unfair ban lifted in Europe. I am realistic, however, and I recognise that it could be tough and that it could take some time. We have to face up to the problem and ensure that our industry is protected.

The hon. Member for Monklands, East referred to the quality of Scotch beef, to which I pay tribute as well as to Somerset beef and any other beef that she would like to mention. When the ban is lifted, we must ensure that we still have an industry to take advantage of it. In that respect, it has been disappointing to see how slowly the disposal programme has got under way. I recognise the scale of the problem. It is the largest slaughter programme ever launched in this country and it is terribly easy for Back Benchers to say that it ought to be done more quickly—or for the Opposition to say so. That is what Oppositions always say.

I recognise how hard my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister and my hon. Friends the Minister of State and the Parliamentary Secretary in particular have worked, and I pay tribute to the way in which they have listened and tried to help. The steps that they have taken have been helpful.

There was a problem with the four-week period for top-up payments, which has been recognised and the period has been extended. I am also glad that my right hon. and learned Friend is fighting hard to get an extension of the 30-month rule for slower maturing

[Mr. Tom King]

breeds, which is important. The announcement of an advance payment for cattle that are not yet able to go for slaughter is exceptionally helpful and will assist the cash flow of farmers.

This is a major programme, and there are continuing difficulties. It was slow to start. An auctioneer in my constituency has been on to me tonight about the problems. I am grateful for the help that I have received with Bridgwater Beef—an abattoir that faced some difficult problems. There will continue to be problems. Farmers have shown exceptional sense and an understanding of the problems. In the main, they have kept calm. Some people tried to stir them up, which is not to their credit. Farmers have shown themselves to be more sensible than that.

Farmers should realise, however, that we are not yet through the problems, which will go on for the next week or two. Thank God it is raining tonight. That is perhaps the most significant agricultural fact that I can advance to the House, because the rain will help. I hope that my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister will get permission for grazing on set-aside for farmers who have to hold cattle for longer than they normally would. As the problems continue, we must continue to listen and try to help.

Finally, on the machinery of government, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is arguably the smallest Ministry and it is the least capable of gearing up to a substantial extra problem. I was Secretary of State at the Department of the Environment, which is a huge Department. Those who face problems at such a Department can draft people in from other Departments. The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is not staffed to cope with extra problems. It is right that Ministries should not be fat with staff—they should be lean and efficiently run—but if we are to keep a Ministry of Agriculture, which I support, there must be arrangements when a problem strikes that enable it to be reinforced. I say that also to Ms on the Opposition Front Bench, if they should ever face such a problem.

I have one suggestion, which may be a little radical. It is no good merely drafting in clerical workers. We need people of a higher grade. I wonder whether my right hon. and learned Friend has considered recruiting some of the recently retired senior staff, and perhaps even one or two recently retired Ministers and junior Ministers with experience of that Department, who could cope with the additional problems.

The hon. Member for Monklands, East complained about the absence of one Minister today, but he was dealing with a fisheries problem with a Norwegian Minister. That is the point—when additional problems and challenges arise, there must be a way to reinforce staff so that the Ministry can give an industry that is vital to our economy the service that it deserves as it faces a challenge of exceptional difficulty and complexity. That is not a political point, but a serious point of administration and organisation. In that way, if we all work together, we will see our industry through to happier times.

8.48 pm

Mr. Tony Banks (Newham, North–West): First, I must tell the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) that I hope that we keep the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, but I do not want that Ministry also to be responsible for food protection. That is one of the problems that we have encountered recently. We need a Ministry to look after the interests of consumers in the food industry, not merely those of producers. We need to remove the Ministry's marked slant towards producers, not consumers. I hope that Labour Front Benchers will make such an announcement before the next general election.

Like others, I have an interest to declare. I speak on behalf of the lowland farmers of Newham. *[Laughter.]* I know that people think that that is a silly comment, but those who know my constituency know that large numbers of cattle wander on Wanstead flats. What will happen to those cattle? Will they be dragged into the scheme and slaughtered? It is a type of rural idiocy that we have in my part of east London that we very much value, and I am very worried about the welfare of those cattle.

There is something unreal about the debate, not only because of the paucity of hon. Members present and the fact that there may not be a Division at the end after two days.

Mr. Peter Hain (Neath) *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Banks: My hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain) says that there will be. We might have to put tellers in. The Government may have decided that they cannot win this one and do not want to expose splits on their own side so, if they cannot win the war—and we will not accept a truce—they will withdraw from the field and allow the vote to go through. As they see it, it will look ludicrous if we win by an enormous margin. That is not the way to address something like the problems of the CAP.

The CAP sits at the heart of the European Union. We should be debating the CAP very seriously, but the debate has been sidetracked into the subject of BSE, so we are missing out a real discussion about the CAP. What I find unreal about the debate is that Britain's future role in the European Union has come down to a matter of meat—of beef. That is what we are talking about. It is the CAP or BSE equals the EU. It is nonsense. The future of this country in the European Union is the most important issue that faces us, but all we do is squabble about BSE and the CAP. It is nonsense.

Some of us are looking at the wider horizons, looking at things in the round, looking at the great potential that exists in the European Union and our potential for playing our full part in it, moving towards what I want, which is a united states of Europe. I want to see a European Government. All those things—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The subject for the debate is the CAP. If the hon. Gentleman does not wish to speak on that matter, he should choose a different evening.

Mr. Banks: I accept that. I am not trying to speak on this matter. All that I am saying is that the whole matter of the European Union in this country seems to come down to the common agricultural policy. That is the point. It is absurd, and it means that we are missing the real issues.

We end up discussing something like the CAP, which is nonsense. It is discrediting the whole principle of the European Union. It is unacceptable how farmers dominate proceedings in the House regarding so much affecting the European Union.

I am not against farmers—my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Mr. Home Robertson) is a farmer, and I am sure that he is a very good one—but I am fed up with the fact that Agriculture Question Time is like farmers' question time. Members of Parliament—mostly Conservative Members—jump up and defend, not consumers, but themselves, because they are farmers. They do not declare their interest.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) will say a few words shortly. I did not notice many Conservative Members defending miners—presumably because there are no miners on the Conservative Benches and it was left to us to defend them—but farmers always seem to attract concern. We always have to worry about farmers. I know we need food, but why should farmers be treated differently from any other group of workers?

Mr. Mark Robinson: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I spoke about the CAP; why cannot the hon. Gentleman? I do not really think he is talking on the subject.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. When the hon. Gentleman talked about the cattle on the lowland flats of Wanstead, he was entirely in order. That seemed to me central to his speech, and if he would embellish that further it would be to the benefit of the House.

Mr. Banks: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for that defence of my position on behalf of the farmers of Newham.

The CAP is indeed about farmers. Set-aside is about the CAP. That is about farmers. We did not say to the miners, "Okay, you can keep your jobs. You do not have to mine any coal, but here are your wages." We say to farmers, "You can have set-aside not to grow anything." That is nonsense and makes the CAP an even more ridiculous institution than it already is.

Fifty per cent. of the European Union budget goes to farmers, whether in Spain, Italy or France. Why do we have to be so concerned about them? No doubt their political vote concerns the politicians. That is what it comes down to. The Conservative party is the party of farmers—not farm workers, but farmers—and I find that unacceptable.

Many hon. Members have spoken tonight about BSE. Years ago, people like me were jumping up in the House and saying, "There is something wrong here. We should not be feeding ruminants animal protein." We do not need scientists to tell us that there is something wrong there. Nature did not devise, structure and evolve those creatures to eat animal protein; something was bound to happen.

I believe that there is enough circumstantial evidence to say that there is a link between BSE and CJD, and it is no good all these Ministers saying that there is nothing to worry about. There was bound to be a panic when two Secretaries of State made statements on the same subject on one day. No one was reassured. No one believes a word these Ministers say these days. They cannot possibly restore confidence because they are not the sort of people that we can have any confidence in, and consumers in this country clearly do not.

How come that taxpayers are now expected to bail out the farmers and the slaughterhouse people and, it seems to me, the cattle cake manufacturers? Why cannot we sue someone for this? We have been poisoned by people who have interfered with nature. They fed animals animal protein, and should not have done so. If this had been a pharmaceutical company instead of a cattle cake company or set of companies, we would have been able to go to court and get substantial compensation. Sue, Grabbit and Run would be out there, ensuring that we got money back for the injuries that we have had to suffer. I find it absurd that all we talk about is how the taxpayer can bail out all these people who made loads of money and took decisions that were an affront against nature and have brought the problems that confront us today.

What about the cattle? I seem to be the only person in the House who asks that. Everyone is saying that we cannot get the cattle to the slaughterhouses and to the renderers fast enough. What about the cattle? The poor devils have given of their best, especially those cows that gave us milk and cheese, and what happens to them now? Off they go to the slaughterhouse, and there they go down to the incinerator. What a terrible thing to happen.

I wish they could cull some Conservative Members. I would like to see some of them go down to the abattoirs and the renderers, although I do not know what good will come of them even if we put them through the renderers, because nothing in their composition is useful to any human being. That is how I see it.

I have received a letter from the Hindus of Newham. *[Laughter.]* Hon. Members suppose that to be funny, but the cow is sacred to the Hindus of India. They have asked the British Government to consider sending the cattle to India, and they are prepared to pay to help them do so. What discussions have taken place with the Indian Government to see whether that sort of measure can be arranged? That is the sort of thing that we should be doing. We should show concern for the consumers and we should also show concern for the cattle, instead of trying to get rid of them all. Let us have some compassion in the House, for God's sake—it is about time.

8.58 pm

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Hastings and Rye): We are nearing the end of our two-day debate on the common agricultural policy. We have squabbled about beef, but we have not squabbled about the common agricultural policy—we all agree that it needs to be reformed, and some good ideas on how it should be reformed have been put forward. I shall raise some issues that affect farmers and people who buy meat in my constituency.

I thank my hon. Friends the Ministers for their hard work in relation to the beef crisis—I know that it has been time consuming and exhausting. In a previous occupation, I negotiated with the European Community and I know that nothing happens quickly or simply. There has been a move towards lifting the ban on gelatine, tallow and semen, which is significant. I wish my hon. Friends further success and I hope that next week we see further movement towards lifting the beef ban.

I thank my hon. Friends the Ministers for the help that they are giving to the farmers, who have been faced with real pressures and problems. They will welcome the

[Mrs. Jacqui Lait]

top-up payment. Yesterday, the farmers who came to lobby me said that they felt that there was significant pressure on them, and I know that they will be grateful that the Government have announced this payment.

I urge the Minister to negotiate hard in relation to being allowed to feed the 30-month cattle on set-aside. That seems to be a sensible solution to this problem at a time when we are desperately short of feed. Over the summer, we will have tremendous problems feeding our cattle and sheep.

We should not continue to feed cattle bone meal—however, the effect of taking it out of their feed will be an increase in the price of feed and, therefore, an increase in the price of beef. That is a long-term problem that the farming industry will have to address.

As a result of this crisis, we have all learned considerably more about the meat industry than we wished to know. We have learned that the rendering industry is a monopoly. It may be that the Office of Fair Trading and the Monopolies and Mergers Commission have not taken an interest in the rendering industry because it is worth only £100 million to £150 million and they look at larger industries.

It seems to me that the rendering industry is behaving in a monopolistic way, which has not helped us to bring in quickly the systems that are needed to deal with the cull policy. Perhaps we should refer the industry to the MMC because whenever a monopoly exists, it is a good capitalist belief that it should not be allowed to continue to exist.

I refer to the effect of the BSE crisis on the consumer. I have a significant number of small, high-quality butchers in my constituency. I got a terrible shock the other day when I bought a leg of lamb and it cost me £22. I learned that the cost of lamb has doubled—it has increased from between £2.20 to £2.40 a pound to between £4.50 to £4.80 a pound. Pork—a cyclical meat, which we would expect to be coming down in price—is maintaining its price. The price of beef is increasing and only the expensive cuts are being sold: fillets, steak and sirloin. The cheaper cuts of beef are not being sold: mince and stewing steak. They are the cuts that will produce a good and cheap meal. The price of chicken has increased also. Therefore, the cost of living has increased for families on a tight budget.

Many people will have to be re-educated when the crisis is over. I was interested to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill) refer favourably to the Meat and Livestock Commission, as farmers in my constituency are usually critical of that organisation. However, I believe that it will have a role to play in due course in re-educating people about using economical cuts of meat.

I turn briefly to the question of common agricultural policy reform. The farming in my area is mixed: we have a lot of fruit, sheep and beef farming and a little dairy farming. Animal feed is grown upon some arable land and there is a little potato farming. We must consider how an area such as that will be affected by the accession of the central European countries to the European Union.

Historically, Poland was known as the breadbasket of Europe. If it reverts to its historic role—there is no reason why it should not—it will have a tremendous effect on temperate production in northern Europe. Poland and the other countries also grow fruit, which will directly affect producers in my constituency. For example, the blackcurrant growers have been affected already. Although it is a tiny industry, those producers derive vital income from it.

Before we admit the central European countries to the European Union, we must put in place some form of agricultural policy—we cannot do without any—that addresses those issues. We cannot negotiate the terms after the countries are admitted: we must settle them now. We must take account of issues such as the fruit and vegetable regime. At present, fruit farmers in my constituency are competing against farmers on the continent who grow for intervention because their co-operative system is different from ours. Therefore, we have a false market in fruit which adversely affects our brilliant fruit farmers.

We must also decide whether set-aside should be regarded as a social payment. The common agricultural policy was introduced in order to keep people on the land—there is general agreement about that. If we wish to continue that policy—set-aside is a way of keeping people on the land—we must decide whether it should be regarded as a social rather than an agricultural payment.

I believe that we should move towards extensive farming—although many of my farmers went adrift because they farmed their beef extensively. Extensive farming leads to a more considered management of the countryside. Agriculture is viewed not simply in the context of the farming industry but as a way of managing delicate and sensitive areas, such as sites of special scientific interest, in which the farmers are particularly interested.

I have made several suggestions for reforming the common agricultural policy and I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will take them on board.

9.8 pm

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): The debate about the common agricultural policy is another in a long series of debates about the Common Market. We have been a member of the Common Market for just over 23 years and we are reaching a point when, as well as becoming frayed at the edges, the contradictions within it are beginning to affect its very centre. The common agricultural policy is central to the Common Market. I shall not dwell on that point, but it is important to make it.

We must find ways of developing the farming industry in this country—which has a relatively poor climate for growing many things—so that we do not have to import too much food. The ratio of imports to exports is about 50:50 now, and it might be even worse than that. To keep down the balance of payments and replace the manufacturing industry that we have lost, we have to find a method—whether in the Common Market or out of it—to ensure the food that we grow can be compared with some of the food from other countries where it is easier to grow such food.

I grew up during the war, when intervention was necessary. It was vital to dig for victory on every plot of land and there were no set-aside schemes when I was a kid.

Mr. Jacques Arnold (Gravesham): Dig up the marshes.

Mr. Skinner: Yes, we dug up the marshes and that is probably why there are cattle in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Newham, North–West (Mr. Banks).

Farming in Britain has had little or nothing to do with market forces. It is easy to farm in a climate in which plants grow more easily, but in this country, traditionally, farming has been about intervention, planning and ensuring that we grow as much as we can so as not to have to import so much.

We may reach a stage when we need a deficiency payment system in Britain, if we get out of the Common Market, or even if we stay in. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke–on–Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson) said earlier, we may need a top-up scheme from the Common Market under which funds must be matched, as in the regional funds. That is a possibility if we stay in, but we certainly cannot farm successfully under market forces.

There is a strange anomaly about some of the people who have contributed to the debate during the past two days and on other occasions. The right-wing Euro-sceptic Tories, who believe in the function of market forces per se, are the very people who represent farming interests and are somehow blind to the idea that we need to subsidise agriculture.

In the mining industry, we lived cheek by jowl with the farming industry. Every pit village is surrounded by 20 fields of small, not big farmers. Big farmers get about 80 per cent. of Common Market subsidies. Even the royal family gets about £500,000 a year from set-aside schemes. I have said that now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, so you cannot stop me. I have not named them, but I could.

As a miner, I had to work against geological difficulties to combat mother nature, and in many ways farmers deal with the same kind of problems. The farmers did not work in a factory, or in a closed environment, and nor did the miners. We miners could lose a whole seam of coal and farmers could have rain when they did not want it. So, in a small way, I am able to understand many of the farmers' problems.

I start from the principle, whether we are in or out of the Common Market, that if we want to have a decent farming industry, we must intervene and plan. I listened to the farmers who took part in the lobby yesterday. Most of them said, in their own vernacular, that it is time for a change. I say that because it is important for the Government to understand it. I spoke to hundreds of farmers yesterday who said, in so many words, that it is time for a change. When I was first elected in Bolsover, the farmers painted the grass blue. They do not do that any more, because they understand the way in which some of us tackle their problems.

As for this crisis, I do not think that it can really be laid at the door of a member of Labour's Front Bench. I remember the day. I come in here nearly every day. I listened to two Ministers—not one, but two. That is the way to start a crisis. Some of us demand statements from Ministers every day, but we do not get them. But along come a Government, without being prompted, with two Ministers. I looked at the monitor and I saw the names of two Ministers. I thought, "Well, obviously, they are going to talk about two different subjects." But they were not; they were talking about the same subject. So, please do not come with this nonsense about blaming the Opposition Front Bench for creating this crisis or, even, for that matter, some reporter from the *Daily Mirror*. I will buy a lot of things, but I ain't buying that.

The Government prompted the issue and startled the nation by sticking on two Ministers, one after the other. I had to decide which one to tackle because I thought that Madam Speaker probably would not allow me to get in twice. That is how it began. We all know the background to it. We might as well understand it. Ministers should understand that, despite all the little nuances that they might apply, the truth is that it has been a battle of philosophies as between regulation, deregulation, market forces or intervention. That is at the bottom of it.

As I said earlier, a farming industry cannot operate on the basis that market forces can reign supreme. It is not possible. What happened was that because of the Thatcherism of the day the Government had to go down the road of deregulation in an industry that should have been the last one that they touched. The net result is that a lot of people made a lot of money, and now the nation's health is suffering as a result.

A lot more could be said, but I just want to say that I have been discussing the matter with some people from my area today. A fellow there has an abattoir that can kill 200 cows. He thinks, "Well, you know, there's a crisis. I suppose that I shall be having to kill some. Johnny Moore down the road has 60 cattle and he needs them killed straight away because he is on the verge of bankruptcy." He assumes that he is on the list of abattoirs, but suddenly he is not on the list any more. He has been taken off. One of the officials asked him whether he was a member of the federation. Apparently, the federation—some kind of cartel of abattoirs—is keeping the little abattoirs out. That is totally wrong. I have been on to the Minister's parliamentary private secretary today because there is obviously a monopoly here.

I get the clear impression that my constituent, Ben Elliot, will not be able to deal with the problem, even though we have only one abattoir on the list which is in Buxton. We always regard Buxton as being nearly in Manchester. We want to know whether it is true that the federation is a kind of freemasonry. Are we saying that no one like Ben Elliot can have a chance to deal with the problem? Should not the Government be clamouring to get such people to kill the cows instead of driving them away? This is important. A lot of cattle will be killed in the crisis. Then what will happen? When the crisis is over, a lot of little abattoirs will have closed down. They will have gone. I hope that the Minister can assure me that that will not be the case.

9.18 pm

Mr. Elliot Morley (Glanford and Scunthorpe): We welcome the debate, even in the neutered form in which it has been presented to us by the Government. It has been overshadowed by the BSE issue and the measures that the Government are bringing in to deal with the slaughter programme, and that is understandable. It is also understandable that so many hon. Members have spoken today and expressed concern on behalf of their beef farmers because of the shambolic way in which the measures have so far been introduced.

I shall return to the BSE issue because it is so important, but first I want to discuss the CAP, which we have debated today. The CAP is important for farmers,

[Mr. Elliot Morley]

taxpayers and consumers—we did not hear too much about them today—and it is important in terms of conservation and land management. The scheme is expensive, costing nearly £3 billion in this country alone. Its cost has increased by 74 per cent. in cash terms since 1992-93. It accounts for half the European Union budget, yet it supports less than 6 per cent. of the European work force. In that respect, it can hardly be described as cost-effective.

We have heard some excellent criticisms of the policy from my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes), my hon. Friend the Member for Newham, North-West (Mr. Banks), who mentioned animal welfare, my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner), who mentioned the problems of his local farmers, my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), who spoke of the effect on world trade, my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Mr. Home Robertson), who referred to his own local farmers, my hon. Friends the Members for Pendle (Mr. Prentice), for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Stevenson) and for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron), and my hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth (Mr. Hardy), who also spoke of the appalling outdoor slaughter of sheep in Paris. As the Minister knows, some of the sheep that were slaughtered in those fields came from Britain, and it appears that they arrived with forged certificates. I hope that the Ministry will investigate that.

There is no doubt that the CAP is urgently in need of reform. We agree with what Ministers have said about that during our two-day debate, although our views may diverge on other issues. Farm income has indeed been strong over the past few years in some agricultural sectors, notably the arable sector. As the Minister of State pointed out, that has provided an opportunity for reform. Labour has long supported a move to decouple support payments from production payments, as have such bodies as the NFU and the CLA, which have produced sensible and constructive policy papers.

We want reform based on clear yearly targets for a reduction in arable support, linked to a reduction in compulsory set-aside to allow farmers to increase production as their support falls. We want the European Union to give notice that quotas will end, and that there will be a move towards a free market. We want a phased reduction in other support payments, with clear indications for the industry so that it can plan ahead. As part of those changes, we want the support that is currently provided for agriculture to be shifted towards environmental support schemes and agri-environmental programmes.

There is considerable scope for that. In particular, there is scope for schemes to encourage the return of farmland birds, whose numbers are declining—as has been highlighted in the current campaign by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds—and mammals such as the brown hare, whose numbers have been drastically reduced in recent years.

We support moves by the Agriculture Commissioner Franz Fischler, who favours what he calls the "evolution" of the CAP. Apparently, "radical reform" is too difficult a concept for the European Union to support; it prefers to use the word "evolution". We are prepared to support that, and, in particular, Franz Fischler's idea that the CAP will evolve in a way that will enable it to support the wider rural community in employment, social and environmental terms. Given the effect of BSE on that wider community, there is a stronger case for providing more general support for rural enterprise and rural communities.

It is true that the pig sector has benefited from the current beef scare, and that has been good news for many of my constituents who are pig farmers. The horticulture sector has not done quite so well, however. Those sectors are not subsidised within the CAP regime; they compete commercially, and survive on efficiency and the quality of their products. They deserve support. One way in which they can be supported without the market intervention that has distorted the CAP is through research and development, and backing from bodies such as the Horticulture Research Institute. The industry is very concerned about, for instance, the prior options review, which it sees as a preparation for privatisation.

The Agricultural Development Advisory Service has done excellent work in the farming community, especially in relation to—this is very topical—the veal demonstration unit, which we discussed in Committee not long ago, its scientists, research and development and bodies such as the state veterinary service. It is wrong that, when there are concerns about BSE, the service should be facing cuts in its budget. That is somewhat irresponsible. Given the changes that are coming in the agriculture sector, it is wrong that bodies such as ADAS should be destabilised.

I want to deal with some of the points raised by the hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) on BSE's origins. I am sorry that he is not in his seat because he would not allow me to intervene in his speech. I said that I would deal with these points and I am a bit sorry to do so, because I did not want to return to the origins of BSE and who was to blame for it. The hon. Gentleman was saying that it had nothing to do with deregulation in the early 1980s.

Hon. Members who have considered the research paper—as usual, well presented by the Library—will note that, in 1979, the then Labour Government proposed to introduce a measure to tighten processing plants.

Mr. Baldry: That was for salmonella.

Mr. Morley: Indeed it was. I do not disagree with that. Salmonella was the main reason for the measure. BSE did not exist at that time. The measure was not, however, just about salmonella. Regulations were proposed to ensure that

"the method of processing was sufficient to destroy all organisms".

Those detailed regulations specified the construction and operational requirements that feed mills would have to meet to obtain a licence. Obviously, those requirements would have been tight, but they would have helped to stop cross-contamination, which arose in later years.

As we know, those measures were not introduced by the Government. They introduced lesser measures in their order in 1981. For the benefit of the hon. Member for South Dorset, I should like to read what the Government said in their consultative document at that time:

"The new proposals reflect the wish of Ministers that in the present economic climate the Industry should itself determine how best to produce a high-quality product, and that the role of

Government should be restricted to prescribing a standard for the product and to enforcing observance of that standard. Ministers take the view that this simpler approach would have the incidental advantage of enabling the Industry to prepare for more stringent measures which might have to be taken at some future date."

That was the root of the problem. That, basically, is a concept of deregulation—that is what it is all about; that is where the problem stems from.

I wanted to make that clear because I want to deal with the serious issues of the ban, of getting it lifted now and of ensuring that the measures that are being introduced work properly. On the longer-term issue of how BSE appeared, the hon. Member for Holland with Boston (Sir R. Body) made some important points about the intensification of the cattle sector, how the feed system changed and how that was brought in.

The priority, therefore, is to get the ban lifted. Labour Members accept that. We accept that there is no justification for the European Union continuing the ban on gelatine, tallow and semen exports. That should be lifted as soon as possible.

As has been mentioned in the debate, the idea that in some way the European Union is responsible for the crisis in the beef industry is just not true. Those who think that just lifting the ban will solve all the problems are extremely naive. This is an issue of credibility and of the Government's credibility, which has been stretched with the implementation of the disposal programme.

Farmers have been incredibly patient. We accept that introducing such a disposal programme takes time, but the Government's main excuse for the problems that they have experienced and for those on which farmers lobbied the House of Commons yesterday is that the disposal is limited by the rendering sector. That is absolutely true, and we would not disagree with it. Yet the Government have always been aware of the rendering sector's capacity.

When the Government first announced the scheme, there was a provisional list of about 40 slaughterhouses. After that, it appeared that only 21 would be in operation. Many of the slaughterhouses on the original provisional list were suddenly off it. At the beginning of the debate yesterday, the number of slaughterhouses suddenly rose to 44, according to the letter circulated by the Minister of Agriculture.

Debates such as this are very useful, whether on fishing or agriculture. We usually get a few extra million pounds out of the Government in fishing debates. During this debate, it appears that we have got an extra 20 slaughterhouses out of them. So we certainly seem to have had some effect.

There are still anomalies in the working of the scheme, and we have heard examples in the debate. Some of the slaughterhouses that have contacted my office to describe their experiences have complained. For example, a slaughterhouse in Yorkshire was on the provisional list and was then told that it was off it. That slaughterhouse has access to an adjacent incinerator that can deal with 150 animals a day. There might be a problem with incineration capacity and it could be a difficulty for the Government. Yet, at this stage at least, that slaughterhouse has not been included in the scheme, despite its access to incineration facilities, which would be very useful.

People from Vines abattoir in East Sussex tell me that the abattoir is 300 yd away from the local cattle market. What is more, they say that they can meet the Government's criteria and are willing to dedicate the slaughterhouse's total throughput to non-food animals. I should have thought that it would be advantageous for the Minister to include such slaughterhouses, as the retail sector wants animals slaughtered under the scheme to be kept separate from clean beef. Another slaughterhouse in Cumbria was on the original list, but does not appear to be on the new list. It is the only one in the area that can take casualty animals, yet it is not clear whether it has been put back in the scheme.

We have heard of problems in other sectors of the industry that have not been given financial support. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Springburn (Mr. Martin) mentioned the head boning industry's problems in his constituency and the difficulties that it will face. He is not alone in encountering such problems.

The Government could argue that the plight of some of the slaughterhouses to which I have referred is due to the rendering capacity. Yet the story is the same with cold storage. They were aware of the maximum rendering capacity and knew that it would not be enough. We now hear that cold storage is to come on stream, but that it might take up to six weeks. That does not help the beef industry or the Government's credibility.

Mr. Baldry: Tuesday.

Mr. Morley: Is the Minister saying that all the cold storage capacity that is needed is available now?

Mr. Baldry: The scheme will start on Tuesday.

Mr. Morley: The Minister is saying that the scheme will start on Tuesday, but not everything will be in place. Yet the Government have had weeks to prepare for it. That demonstrates that there appears to have been no contingency plan, as the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Rathbone) said.

I hope that the Minister will consider a quality assurance scheme, which would also help to get the ban lifted, and electronic tagging and databases, which have not been mentioned in the debate. I understand that a number of schemes are available that the Minister could introduce.

The Government's credibility is not helped by their constant attacks on Europe. The worldwide ban may be illegal, but that is for the courts to decide. It is right and proper that such issues are tested in the courts. It would be ironic if the European Court ruled in favour of issues for which the Euro-sceptics are arguing. The empty, silly threats and sabre rattling of Ministers, who say one day that there will be sanctions and the next that there will not, are not credible. Attacks on the EU by Ministers who say that they will not fly European flags do not help. I am sure that not putting up a few European flags in Scotland really frightened the EU.

That does not help; it certainly does not help us to achieve a settlement when the European beef market has been so severely damaged by the problems in our country that European taxpayers will have to pay for a compensation scheme. They will still be net contributors, even when the adjustments are taken into account. And what have they had in return? Insults, threats and the childish action of the Secretary of State for Scotland in refusing to fly the European flag.

[Mr. Morley]

Is that really a credible act? How will it help not only with the BSE crisis but in reforming the common agricultural policy? Hon. Members have said that we need to act in co-operation with other member states and persuade them to support us. Acting as the Conservatives have done certainly will not help to do that.

It does not help to blame the European Union. Before the EU ban was announced, 26 other countries, including Canada and the United States, had banned British beef. It is not credible to use the crisis as a stick with which to beat the EU; the Government should not be led by the nose by their Euro-sceptics. Cabinet Ministers have not helped the situation with their huffing and puffing, or by the way in which the Government have been led by their Back Benchers.

That is one of the reasons why we want to vote tonight. After listening to some of what has been said in the debate about where the blame lies, it is important that we adopt a constructive approach to deal with the immediate crisis. Certainly, that is what the Opposition have been trying to do.

It has been said during the debate that a future Labour Government would give in to everything that Europe demanded. I draw the attention of the House to a book called "In Their Own Words", by the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill), which outlines the plot to turn Europe into a super-state. The hon. Gentleman goes into detail about the policies of the three main parties, which he outlines as proof that there will be a European federal super-state and all the parties will cave in to Europe.

The hon. Gentleman devotes six pages to the Labour party and the terrible things that we have said. He devotes only two pages to the Liberal Democrats. That is a bit unfair, a bit hard on the Liberal Democrats. However, to the way in which the Conservative party—his own party—will sell out to the European Union, he devotes 26 pages.

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): Not enough.

Mr. Morley: Indeed not, because the hon. Gentleman devotes a further 26 pages to the sayings of the Conservatives associated with the European People's party, and how they are selling out to the EU. So I do not think that hon. Members can accuse the Labour party of giving in to Europe.

What I have described illustrates the civil war taking place on the Conservative Benches, and shows how it is affecting the position of this country. That is why the Labour party is asking for a vote tonight. We believe that a vote is an important expression of the views of the House, and we shall vote on the Adjournment to demonstrate our concern about the problems in the beef sector and the lack of adequate response so far.

We shall vote to show our dissatisfaction with the progress made so far in reforming the CAP. Above all, we shall vote to show our concern about a Government so lacking in credibility that they send their Members of Parliament home rather than allow them the opportunity for a substantive vote. For that reason alone, and because of the abuse of the democratic system that it represents, all hon. Members should join us in the Lobby.

9.38 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mrs. Angela Browning): How nice to see so many members of the Labour party here tonight. As none of them bothered to turn up for Monday's agriculture debate, they have obviously been shamed into coming here on Thursday instead.

Although the debate is about the common agricultural policy, inevitably it has focused on BSE and the difficulties in the beef market. It is right that it should have done so, because there is no doubt that we are dealing with one of the most serious issues that has faced agriculture in this country for many years, possibly since the second world war.

Some hon. Members widened the subject somewhat and talked about the more general aspects of the CAP. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Cash) mentioned the need for reform, and spoke about the problems of fraud within the CAP.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) made his usual constructive contribution and went into the details of why the common agricultural policy must be examined.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Mrs. Lait) emphasised the implications of a wider Europe, with countries coming in from eastern Europe. She mentioned in particular the effect on fruit and vegetable production in her constituency, and the need for all member states to be aware of the need for CAP reform.

The Conservative Government have produced a document outlining our plans for reform of the CAP, and quite rightly. When one considers that two thirds of all CAP expenditure goes to farmers, there is a need to reform the policy rather than merely to have a knee-jerk reaction in the future, when the expansion of the Community is more imminent.

Everyone knows that agriculture needs a long lead time. For it to be reformed overnight would be disastrous—for farmers not only in this country but across the Community. We shall continue to press our European partners to adopt sensible proposals to start the dialogue and discussion about what is necessary to reform the CAP.

As some Conservative Members mentioned in their speeches, the hon. Member for Monklands, East (Mrs. Liddell) said at the beginning of her speech that she felt that co-operation was needed across the Chamber on the very difficult issue of BSE and its effects on the beef industry. Regrettably, she then went on in a manner that is characteristic not only of her but of other Opposition Members. It has been picked up—

Mr. Donald Dewar (Glasgow, Garscadden): She told the truth.

Mrs. Browning: No, not necessarily. She went on to identify certain aspects of policy with which she disagreed. Like all hon. Members, I share her concern for those working in the meat industry, such as head boners, who have suffered because of what has happened with BSE. I have concern for head boners in particular because a SEAC recommendation made the entire head, apart from the tongue, a specified bovine material. So of course we have sympathy for those people. It was extremely

unfortunate that the Government were accused across the Chamber in this debate of mocking people who are in such a difficult position. That is not the case. I have personally seen the head boners and heard how their industry will be affected.

Mr. Michael J. Martin: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs. Browning: I shall do so in a moment, because I know that the hon. Gentleman mentioned them in his speech.

The hon. Member for Monklands, East went on to expand on other aspects of the downstream effects of what has happened, and the effects on many workers in many ancillary industries. She did not tell the House whether, under Labour party policy, public money would have been used to compensate everyone who has lost. I reiterate again that public money in very large measure has gone, and it continues to go, to keeping the beef market open.

As many hon. Members have said in this debate, regardless of how long it takes to raise the ban, the restoration of the entire beef industry—abattoirs, hauliers and everyone in the chain—depends on us restoring confidence and keeping the chain open. We have directed public money to keeping that chain open. It would be impossible to compensate, pound for pound, everyone who has lost because of the crisis.

It is extremely unjustified to say that the Government have mocked, because we have listened and tried to be as sympathetic as we can, but our resources are limited. If the hon. Lady was saying that a Labour Government would not have limited resources in this matter, she should say so.

Mr. Martin: I ask the Minister to reconsider the position of the people in the head boning industry whom I mentioned. They were told on a Thursday night to finish their business. They were not able to continue on the Friday morning. Surely people such as Mrs. Fyfe should get some compensation. She will be made bankrupt if the Minister does not do something.

Mrs. Browning: I thought that I had just explained to the hon. Gentleman the difficulty caused to the head boners by the fact that the material that they used was made a specified bovine material overnight. Regrettably, it had to be that way once SEAC had said that the head could not be used. We were able to give some support to head boners who had meat in chillers, although I appreciate that it was small in comparison to the overall business, if the business was dependent entirely on processing bovine heads. We gave careful consideration to the matter, but he will appreciate the precedent of our picking out individuals for direct compensation. The money that has been made available to date was not to compensate pound for pound but to keep the chain open and keep the industry going within the United Kingdom so that even those people down the line, to whom the hon. Member for Monklands, East referred, would have a chance. We wished to save jobs by keeping the whole of the production chain going, keeping the beef industry going, and improving confidence.

The hon. Member for Monklands, East also accused us of being ostrich-like on the selective cull. I am not sure what she meant by that. The proposal for a selective cull has been put to Europe. It would take out cohorts of animals. It is based, as close as we can get, on scientific evidence. The aim is to remove animals that might possibly go down with BSE in the future. If the hon. Lady thinks that the policy that we have presented to Europe, and which it has rejected so far, is ostrich-like, and if 42,000 specially selected animals is not enough, it is incumbent on her to say how many animals would be culled under a Labour Government. Would it be whole herds of animals?

A recurring theme in the speeches of Opposition Members, including that of the hon. Member for Glanford and Scunthorpe (Mr. Morley), is the suggestion that Labour would have been better at negotiating. Indeed, it would. Its tactics and policies have been clearly spelt out by the leader of the Labour party. He has said that he would never be isolated in Europe. He would not stand up for the British interest. In negotiations, he would not, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister has done, represent scientifically the British interest. He would have rolled over, played dead and said, "How many animals do you want us to kill? We will go back home and do it." That would not be in the interests of the farming industry or of this country. The Conservative Government will not roll over and play dead.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Sir J. Cope), who followed the hon. Member for Monklands, East, paid tribute—

Mr. Ron Davies (Caerphilly): She is reading her brief.

Mrs. Browning: I am not using the civil service brief. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that so many interesting speeches have been made by hon. Members on both sides of the House tonight that I intend in the customary way to give my personal appreciation of what has been said.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Northavon rightly, as a Member of Parliament who takes a close interest in agricultural matters, spoke clearly about the need for recovery of consumer confidence. Some Opposition Members mentioned the restoration of consumer confidence. Opposition Members spoke tonight about the fact that schools had banned beef from their menus. Yet only today Cumbria county council reintroduced beef into its school menus. We should all support and appreciate that action. However, I have to inform the House that that measure was passed by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat members of the council. Every Labour councillor voted against it.

Mr. Salmond: Does the Minister understand that the Scottish industry cannot be sustained merely by a resumption of beef sales in the domestic marketplace? The premium produce goes to Europe, where we get prices that we cannot get at home. The Minister has outlined the step-by-step approach and released a consultation document which refers to grass-fed herds, but it is disappointingly narrow in its scope. Will she tell us a bit more about the step-by-step approach and whether the consultation document is the final word on the matter?

Mrs. Browning: I hope that it is not. The hon. Gentleman should appreciate that we wanted to get the scheme going quickly because we did not want— *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Newcastle-under-

[Mrs. Browning]

Lyme (Mrs. Golding) is laughing. Strictly speaking, I should have consulted for six weeks, but I have restricted it to two weeks because I want to get the scheme going as quickly as possible. I can understand the hon. Gentleman's frustration, but there are certain methods that we can use to make sure that we can give an absolute assurance to the consumer, which is absolutely imperative, but also to SEAC, because we are going beyond the two-and-a-half-year limit. We have to go back to SEAC and say that we want to go beyond the limit, and we want SEAC to endorse the plan. We have to persuade our European partners that such a scheme is failsafe.

If there were any question that the scheme could be misused, that would totally undermine the whole scheme. I agree that the scheme is constructed somewhat narrowly to begin with, but I hope it will be a start on which we can build. Ultimately, I want us to use microchips as the means of traceability for such schemes, but I could not introduce those fast enough to get the scheme up and running. That is something for down the line.

Our priority in the Ministry is to get the scheme agreed and up and running because many beef farmers at the moment—as the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) will know from his constituency—have excellent mature beef herds. We do not want them to go in the two-and-a-half-year scheme. We want the farmers to be able to sell them on the market.

Mr. David Nicholson: Does my hon. Friend agree that the evidence that she has given from Cumbria, plus the statements by the hon. Member for Peckham (Ms Harman) and the other panic statements by Labour Members, show that the reason why they are here in such numbers tonight to vote is not because of their interest in the agricultural community or the beef industry but for their pursuit of a narrow party political purpose?

Mrs. Browning: I concur with my hon. Friend, who has summed up the motivation of all the Members who have missed their last trains tonight and who are sitting here this evening. They are showing an uncharacteristic interest in farming issues—there must some other motive, and people can come to their own conclusions.

I wish to pay tribute to the speech tonight from the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood)—*[Interruption.]* He looks startled, and I hope that I have not damaged his reputation. Not only did he say that he felt that co-operation and constructive dialogue between parties was necessary, but he went on to make some suggestions. I cannot give him a positive response on all of them tonight, but I appreciate the spirit in which he came to the Chamber tonight. It was a very refreshing change.

During the two days of debate, we have heard considerable speeches from Members representing the county of Dorset. Today, my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) raised several issues, including advance payment on the flat rate per head of animals. He referred to other issues that he and his colleagues from Dorset have raised with us individually. I can assure him that we shall pay particular attention to the points that he raised.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset for making clear to the House the genesis of how the feed procedures were changed. [HON. MEMBERS: "He was wrong."] Opposition Members are saying he was wrong, but he has placed the papers in the Library and anyone can check them. I hope that all who are interested in getting to the truth will take the opportunity to do so.

My hon. Friend the Member for Holland with Boston (Sir R. Body) gave a detailed account of his experience in the agriculture industry over many years, and that background was of benefit to many of us in the Chamber. I thank him for setting out the background of how farming systems have changed over the years. He also referred to the genesis of the changes on feed. My hon. Friends the Members for Taunton (Mr. Nicholson) and for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Robinson)—both Somerset Members—spoke tonight, and they have represented the views of their farmers and abattoirs to Ministers in recent weeks. My hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome in particular mentioned fallen stock, and I hope that the House heard the statement yesterday that we hope to speed matters up by using incineration which is not being used to its full capacity. We hope to avoid welfare problems by speeding up transport of fallen stock directly from the farm to the incinerator.

Several hon. Members mentioned the use of small incinerators, some of which are attached to slaughterhouses. Again, we are actively considering that. I must advise the House, however, that whatever system we operate, and wherever we operate it, for the 30-month scheme it is critical that it is monitored at the point where the animals go through. It would be devastating if, in six months, a story appeared that somehow animals from the 30-month scheme had got into the human food chain. That may be frustrating for hon. Members and their farmers and other constituents, but it is important that there is proper supervision at all points at which animals aged over 30 months are dealt with.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill) and the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) have said that they will not be able to listen to my reply.

Mr. Barnes: I am here.

Mrs. Browning: I beg the hon. Gentleman's pardon. I know why my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow cannot be here. He is to attend an agricultural show tomorrow and felt that he had to make the journey home.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East (Sir G. Vaughan) said that the worldwide ban was unwarranted and drew attention to the fact that the ban on bovine by-products affects many industries. This debate has focused on beef and its immediately associated products of gelatine, tallow and semen, but many industries use bovine products in one way or another. It is important to recognise that while the worldwide ban continues, many industries will be affected and not only those directly connected to farms.

My hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Mr. Riddick) gave robust support to British beef and called the ban quite outrageous. It is outrageous and although we will need the patient negotiations of my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister in Europe, it is right that we should continue to say that the ban is outrageous and unjustified. It has brought a British industry to its

knees and that has caused great anger not only among farmers but among hon. Members, who recognise only too well the effect that that has had on our industry. It is right that we should continue to press for early lifting of the ban in total.

Sir John Cope: Will my hon. Friend comment on the point that I made about the behaviour of the standing veterinary committee? If it would approach its task on a scientific basis instead of with market considerations in mind, it would help to restore consumer confidence on the continent, which is the single most important thing to do.

Mrs. Browning: My right hon. Friend is right. We sometimes take for granted in Britain that the Ministry gets very good veterinary advice both from its own vets and from the vets and scientists on whom we rely for independent advice. We expect such advice and decision making to be based on science. It is a tenet of MAFF that it should listen to the science and base its decisions on science rather than on politics. That has not been the case so far in Europe. We hope that that will change and that before a week is out, the ban on gelatine, tallow and semen will be lifted. We hope that the science will prevail in Europe. So far, it is clear that people whom we would have expected to have made scientific judgments have ignored the science.

Many hon. Members, especially Conservative Members, have suggested that we should try to encourage trade outside the EU despite the ban. We can, have and will make sure that our scientists are available to any country that wants to examine the science for itself. I am well aware that, very often, our trading partners outside Europe are not familiar with BSE or the programmes that we have in place to protect the human food chain. Many people want to come here and see for themselves. We shall make ourselves and our scientists available so that any country that has an interest in what we do and how we come to our scientific decisions has access to those scientists and—

Mr. Dewar *rose in his place and claimed to move*, That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put accordingly, That this House do now adjourn:—

The House divided: Ayes 252, Noes 1.

Division No. 129] **[10.00 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene
Ainger, Nick
Allen, Graham
Alton, David
Anderson, Ms Janet *(Ros'dale)*
Armstrong, Hilary
Austin-Walker, John
Banks, Tony *(Newham NW)*
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Margaret
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Betts, Clive
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Boateng, Paul
Bradley, Keith
Bray, Dr Jeremy
Brown, Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, N *(N'c'tle upon Tyne E)*
Burden, Richard
Byers, Stephen
Cabom, Richard
Callaghan, Jim
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Cann, Jamie
Carlile, Alexander *(Montgomery)*
Chidgey, David
Church, Judith
Clark, Dr David *(South Shields)*
Clarke, Tom *(Monklands W)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Mrs Ann
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Covy SE)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John
Cunningham, Roseanna
Dafis, Cynog
Darling, Alistair
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Bryan *(Oldham C'tral)*
Davies, Chris *(L'Boro & S'worth)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham, H'dge H'l)*
Denham, John
Dewar, Donald
Dixon, Don
Dobson, Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eastham, Ken
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fatchett, Derek
Field, Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fisher, Mark
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foulkes, George
Fraser, John
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Garrett, John
Gerrard, Neil
Gilbert, Rt Hon Dr John
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mildred
Graham, Thomas
Grant, Bernie *(Tottenham)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike
Hardy, Peter
Harman, Ms Harriet
Harvey, Nick
Hattersley, Rt Hon Roy
Henderson, Doug
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith *(Streatham)*
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hogg, Norman *(Cumbernauld)*
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Howarth, Alan *(Strat'rd-on-A)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley North)*
Howells, Dr Kim *(Pontypridd)*
Hoyle, Doug
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Robert *(Aberdeen N)*
Hughes, Roy *(Newport E)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark)*
Hutton, John
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Glenda *(H'stead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Shef'ld, H)*
Jamieson, David
Janner, Greville
Jenkins, Brian *(SE Staff)*
Johnston, Sir Russell
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd, SW)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keen, Alan
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross,C&S)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kirkwood, Archy
Lestor, Joan *(Eccles)*
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Stretford)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loyden, Eddie
Lynne, Ms Liz
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McKelvey, William
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
Maclennan, Robert
McMaster, Gordon
McNamara, Kevin
MacShane, Denis
McWilliam, John
Madden, Max
Maddock, Diana
Marek, Dr John
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Martin, Michael J *(Springburn)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Michael
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffield Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin *(Gt Grimsby)*
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Rhodri
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Alfred *(Wy'nshawe)*
Morris, Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John
Mowlam, Marjorie
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Paul
Nicholson, Emma *(Devon West)*

Oakes, Rt Hon Gordon
O'Brien, Mike *(N W'kshire)*
O'Brien, William *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Edward
Oiner, Bill
Orme, Rt Hon Stanley
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Powell, Ray *(Ogmore)*
Prentice, Bridget *(Lew'm E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Radice, Giles
Randall, Stuart
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Dr John
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Co'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Salmond, Alex
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Clare
Simpson, Alan
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Chris *(Isl'ton S & F'sbury)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spearing, Nigel
Spellar, John
Squire, Rachel *(Dunfermline W)*
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stott, Roger
Strang, Dr. Gavin
Straw, Jack
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thompson, Jack *(Wansbeck)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Walker, Rt Hon Sir Harold
Wareing, Robert N
Watson, Mike
Welsh, Andrew
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Sw'n W)*
Williams, Alan W *(Carmarthen)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Wise, Audrey
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Dr Tony
Young, David *(Bolton SE)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Malcolm Chisholm and
Mr. George Mudie.

NOES

Atkinson, David *(Bour'mouth E)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Ms Ann Coffey and
Mr. Greg Pope.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Adjourned at fourteen minutes past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 17 May 1996

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Education (16 to 19-year-olds)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[*Mr. Wood.*]

9.34 am

The Minister of State, Department for Education and Employment (Mr. Eric Forth): In this debate we shall show the success of Government policies for 16-to-19 education and training. The Government chose this topic for debate, because 16-to-19 education and training is an area where we need to do still better to match our competitors in the global trading environment; because it is a key to achieving the demanding national targets that we have set ourselves; and because it is an area in which the creation of the new Department for Education and Employment gives us a great opportunity to improve.

The skills and knowledge of new entrants to the labour market are among the most important determining factors of the economic and social success of any nation. I shall briefly review the range of measures that the Government have taken to ensure that success is achieved in that vital area. I shall then outline areas of further action, because we have no intention of resting on our success. The nature of skills and knowledge needed by young people inevitably changes as technology changes the nature of jobs, the employment market and society.

Indisputably, Britain needs a highly motivated, well-educated, well-trained and adaptable work force. To achieve that, we have set ourselves demanding targets. We shall need to meet or even exceed them if we are to compete with the best in the worldwide marketplace.

To meet that goal, the policy for training and education of young people must be guided by some key principles. Young people must obtain the general understanding and skills that they need for adult life and work. They need opportunities to achieve at the highest level that they can. To create such opportunities, responsive and effective institutional structures must be provided in schools, colleges and workplaces.

That achievement must be measured against secure and rigorous standards in a range of high-quality qualifications. The Government are determined that all education and training qualifications be sound measures of achievement.

The first thing to make clear is that 16-to-19 education and training is already a success story. With the help of our partners in education and the world of employers, we have achieved much in recent years. Participation and achievement have reached record levels. By the end of 1994, the proportion of 16-year-olds in education and training was 88.2 per cent.—an increase from 83.2 per cent. only four years earlier.

Among A-level students, achievements continue to improve. In 1995, the provisional pass rate was 84 per cent. compared with 68 per cent. in 1980, with nearly 30 per cent. of 17-year-olds gaining two or more A-levels—more than double the 1980 figure.

We have introduced new qualifications alongside A-levels. General national vocational qualifications—or GNVQs—are an alternative set of qualifications for students remaining in full-time education. Although they were introduced nationally as recently as September 1993, they have rapidly attracted very many students—more than 200,000 are currently studying for GNVQs.

The Government are firmly committed to ensuring choice and diversity in the routes available to young people at 16. That means that we need to make available a high-quality work-based training option to young people who are more attracted by the practical approach than by traditional academic routes.

Modern apprenticeships, available nationally from September 1995, are already becoming established as the work-based route to higher-level skills. They will rapidly become a very important part of the post-16 education and training scene. Already about 25,000 young people have been recruited, and evaluation shows that modern apprenticeship is attracting young people with high achievement and that they have high regard for the quality of training that they receive.

We have also pioneered new training approaches. Youth training offers the opportunity for 16 and 17-year-olds to receive training leading to a recognised vocational qualification of at least NVQ level 2 or equivalent. Between April 1994 and January 1995, 71 per cent. of young people completing youth training in England and Wales were in a job six months after leaving training, and 72 per cent. gained a qualification or credit towards one. About 4.5 million young people have entered Government-supported training since 1983. We want to do even better in future. I shall say more about that later.

Furthermore, all training and enterprise councils have been offering youth credits since April last year and young people are using them to access either youth training or modern apprenticeships. Youth credits help to give young people more choice, more flexibility and a greater sense of personal responsibility when buying their training. Early evaluation results show that young people are taking training more seriously, fewer are prepared to take a job without training and more are aware of the options and choices available.

Underpinning those successes in raising achievements, we have take action to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the delivery and administration of education and training. Within central Government, the merger between the two former Departments—Education and Employment—has been a clear sign of the Government's commitment to creating a national framework of training and education opportunities. The greater flexibility available to colleges of further education through self-governance, and the continued development of TECs, have helped to encourage responsiveness to local as well as national needs.

[Mr. Eric Forth]

It was in the context of that enormous progress and improvement in achievement that the Secretary of State asked Sir Ron Dearing, in April 1995, to review the framework of qualifications most used by 16 to 19-year-olds. Sir Ron published his report on 27 March. He has received wide support for his analysis of the current situation and warm approval for his proposals for taking us forward.

We have asked Sir Ron, as chairman of the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, and his counterpart in the National Council for Vocational Qualifications, Sir Michael Heron, to advise on next steps for the bulk of the recommendations. Our key task now is to pick up the challenge of the Dearing agenda and make it work.

Sir Ron recommended a new qualifications framework at four national levels—entry, foundation, intermediate and advanced—further strengthening of the rigour and standards of A-levels, the creation of a new AS qualification and the development of a new system of national traineeships. The Government have happily endorsed all those recommendations. We expect much of the new qualifications framework to be in place by September 1997, and work on developing new and revised qualifications to be well in hand by that date.

I should like to highlight some of the key areas where we are taking action to follow up the Dearing report. I shall begin, appropriately, with A-levels. Our firmly held belief is that A-levels remain at the heart of the qualifications system for 16 to 19-year-olds. They are tried and tested, popular and successful. We are committed to the A-level—I make no apology for that. The Government are not about to jettison an examination that has stood the test of nearly 50 years.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): As a Scot, does the Minister agree that the Scottish system of Highers—a broader set of examinations, which Scottish children take at the age of 18, and which corresponds more closely to the baccalaureate or other European systems—is perhaps better than the narrow English system of A-levels?

Mr. Forth: Just because something corresponds with European systems does not make it any good—I do not know where the hon. Gentleman got that idea. My recollection of the Scottish system is that it served well those who had the privilege of enjoying it. I am too modest to judge the outcome of Scottish education and shall leave others to do that. The hon. Gentleman misses an important point: there are many different traditions in England and Scotland. He understands the differences in their legal systems, the Church, education and many other institutions, which is good and healthy. But any attempt to import—even from Scotland—something that is seen to be different or better would probably be mistaken.

We have our own traditions here in England. Sir Ron Dearing proposes to improve what we have; I know that he looked closely at the Scottish system, and I am sure that if he had thought that a straightforward importation of the Scottish system to England would have been of benefit, he would have recommended it, but he did not.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): Did the Government accept the Higginson recommendations, which would have broadened A-levels in the way that the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) suggested?

Mr. Forth: A legitimate debate is always undertaken—the Dearing report reflected that—on how far one seeks to change the breadth and depth of A-levels and how far one seeks to retain their essence. Sir Ron recommended a new-style AS-level as his method of broadening the system. Typically, he struck a careful balance between keeping the best of what we have—what we have been used to, what is recognised and understood—and providing a means of broadening that, mainly through the new AS-level, plus the national framework.

Dame Angela Rumbold (Mitcham and Morden): Does my hon. Friend agree that over the past 20 to 30 years there has been a dramatic change in the framework and form of education in this country? The one thing that is the gold standard, the test against which we can judge academic achievement, is the A-level. Would it not be a disgrace for us to change our system to those of other countries simply because they are different and because we are dissatisfied with everything about this country's education?

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, because she accurately reflects the belief held by not just the Government, but by most people, both inside and outside the education system. If we were tempted to go with what is sometimes mistakenly seen as some sort of popular flow, and to say that A-levels were outdated or elitist, we would be in great danger of losing the anchor that has provided stability and continuity in our education system for generations.

Sir Ron Dearing has managed to retain that anchor, but has built on and developed the key 16 to 19-year-old qualifications framework in a way that can carry us forward—we are grateful to him for that. But that does not mean that we cannot or should not consider A-levels from time to time or that they cannot be improved. The Government are determined to ensure, at the very least, that the rigour and standards in A-levels are protected and, if necessary, enhanced.

Sir Ron's report contains a number of recommendations, even on A-levels, a few of which I shall highlight. He said that we need to raise standards in subjects found to be easier than the average. We do not do young people any favours—and we do not improve skills in the work force—if we reduce standards.

We should aim to reduce the number of overlapping syllabuses in order to simplify the process of protecting standards. We should review examination standards every five years. We warmly welcome Sir Ron's recommendation of the establishment of a robust and systematic archive of examination material, so that we are better able to track the movement of standards over a period—which is currently very difficult. We should also reinforce rigour and standards in modular A-levels; we intend to examine options for combining aspects of both approaches. Sir Ron has also proposed introducing a new advanced subsidiary—or AS—qualification, representing the first half of a full A-level, to promote breadth of study in the first year of the A-level course and, it is hoped, to reduce wastage.

We have already welcomed those recommendations in principle, subject to further advice on the detail from the SCAA and the examination boards. We expect any changes to syllabuses that flow from the recommendations to be in place by September 1998. Some commentators have suggested that the outcome of the Dearing review risks diluting A-levels, but I do not believe that. We are planning the biggest ever programme of action to secure and improve the rigour and standards of the A-level examination. The establishment of a robust and systematic archive of examination material will, from now on, give us information to allow us to track more efficiently the rigour and standards of A-levels. We are confronting that issue head on, and Sir Ron has provided us with the basis on which to do that more effectively in future.

The need for rigour is no less important in vocational qualifications. Employers know what standards must be met in order to compete, and that is why NVQs are firmly based on standards set by employers. We have an on-going programme to help employers to articulate their standards, and they are increasingly using NVQs. More than 1 million NVQs have been awarded, and last year the number of awards increased by 16 per cent. Surveys show that 40 per cent. of medium and large firms now offer NVQs to their work force.

However, we need both to bring NVQs to more people and to improve assessment. We must reduce the unnecessary bureaucracy that has grown up around them. We want to make them more attractive, particularly to smaller firms, and to clarify the assessment requirements. Over the next two years, we shall review each NVQ and embark upon a rigorous programme of simplification, updating and revision, following Mr. Gordon Beaumont's report. When I visit factories and talk to those who have achieved NVQs, they tell me what a difference they have made to their motivation. They believe that they have achieved long-overdue recognition of the skills that they have acquired over many years. The NVQ programme will not only provide a new level of recognition of workplace skills, but motivate employees throughout the work force.

As with NVQs, GNVQs are contributing strongly to meeting the demanding national targets that I mentioned earlier. GNVQs have rapidly become a popular option. They are unlocking potential and motivating young people and adults of all abilities. However, they are not a soft option. Inspections by both the Office for Standards in Education and the Further Education Funding Council have confirmed that advanced GNVQs demand work that is at least equivalent to two A-levels.

Nevertheless, much remains to be done to improve the quality and relevance of GNVQs and the way in which they are delivered. We are determined to strengthen and improve them. We are making available about £30 million over the three-year period 1995-96 to 1997-98 to fund work following up the Dearing recommendations on GNVQs.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Mid-Staffordshire): Does my hon. Friend agree that part of the problem with GNVQs is that they are not recognised by employers? Perhaps he can allocate some of the £30 million to an advertising campaign that would highlight the advantages of GNVQs not only to employers but to the general public, who I believe are unaware of what they offer.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend tempts me to reallocate to advertising money that we intended to apply directly to GNVQs. I must think about that proposal. Although the power of advertising is well known—particularly to my hon. Friend—one must be rather cautious about diverting education money to advertising, even for the best of motives. A better route is probably through the careers service, which is being revamped and sharpened, and through improved awareness among teachers, parents and pupils of the value of GNVQs. That would be linked to an increasing acceptance of GNVQs in university admission requirements. My hon. Friend will know how quickly word spreads in the education world from universities, through senior school and down to more junior levels. GNVQ part 1, which we are piloting for 14-year-olds, is already beginning to gain attention.

Mr. Fabricant: And employers?

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend's approach is perhaps justified in that area. I shall think carefully about his helpful suggestion and consider whether we can justify spending a modest amount on advertising or promotional material in order to draw employers' attention to the excellence and relevance of GNVQs.

Dearing built on the recommendations of the Capey report on the assessment and grading of GNVQs. The report rightly criticises the complex and time-consuming nature of the current procedures. They must be simplified, the quality control improved, and clear national standards firmly established. We expect the National Council for Vocational Qualifications to make rapid and effective progress in those areas in the coming year.

The Government are fully committed to improving links between education and work, and GNVQs provide an ideal opportunity to achieve that—so long as employers understand their potential, as my hon. Friend said. We are working with a number of industry training organisations to ensure that GNVQs are wholly relevant to the industries that they cover.

One of the most promising parts of the Dearing report is the package of proposals on the key skills that employees need for lifetime learning. Those key skills include the ability to communicate effectively, to calculate and use numerical information, and to use information technology effectively. The Dearing report left no doubt as to the importance of developing key skills. Employers have called consistently for their development at increasingly higher levels; they know that they are necessary.

Sir Ron's proposals would give every young person aged between 16 and 18 the chance of developing those key skills. In GNVQs, that would occur through the core skills units that are already in place. In the work-based route, it would be achieved through his proposals for their inclusion in national traineeships and consolidation of their position in modern apprenticeships. In A-levels, key skills would be achieved through the development of a new AS in key skills and, over time, through review of the A-level subject cores.

That is a pretty tall order, but we are already making progress. Sir Ron recommended that the core skills unit in information technology be approved for use with 14 to 16-year-olds, and we intend to accept his advice. The unit will be available to schools from this September.

The question of organisation must be addressed in implementing the Dearing qualification proposals. We want clear equivalence between different types of

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qualifications—our old friend, parity of esteem—and we want to reward and recognise achievement, whether in A-levels or in other areas. We want to end up with a clearer, simpler and more accessible framework.

The SCAA and the NCVQ will be responsible for taking forward much of that work. We agree with Sir Ron that the time is right to look at ways of bringing those organisations closer together. Over the past few years, the SCAA and the NCVQ have helped to transform education and training. The NCVQ has created a framework for vocational education and training from the fragmented and unco-ordinated provision that existed before. The SCAA is responsible for implementing the national curriculum and its assessment arrangements, and it has done much to strengthen standards in GCSEs and A-levels.

The organisations have achieved much separately, but they could achieve more together. That is why this week we published a consultation document on the future of the SCAA and the NCVQ, which sets out some possible options. The first is to replace the SCAA and the NCVQ with two new bodies: one with responsibility for the curriculum and statutory assessment and the other with responsibility for qualifications.

The second option is to replace those organisations with a single body to take on all those responsibilities. There is a case for a single body having responsibility for qualifications and for curriculum matters. However, we want to be sure that the worlds of employment and education support that option as the best way forward. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will decide on the way ahead after the consultation ends in July.

One of the Government's top priorities is to bring employers' influence to bear on all phases of education, so that our young people understand the qualities and skills that they will need when they join the labour market, and the opportunities for which they are best suited. Close links between education and business are integral to our drive to raise young people's achievement levels. That is clear from our competitiveness White Papers. The first of those, "Helping Business to Win", which was released in 1994, sets out a framework of objectives for education business links work. It asks training and enterprise councils to meet challenging targets on work experience for young people, placements for teachers in business, and placements for business people in education. I am pleased to announce that 92 per cent. of secondary schools now have links with business and more than 190,000 teachers have had placements in business since 1989.

An important element in bringing education and employment together is the availability of good-quality work-based training opportunities for young people. Modern apprenticeships, which have been available nationally since September 1995, are a key plank of the education and training contribution to the Government's competitiveness agenda. The success of modern apprenticeships has shown that there is a strong demand for apprenticeship opportunities from employers and young people.

The Government are playing a supporting role, providing financial support and facilitating the partnership at national level. However, we are looking to industry and to employers to come forward with apprenticeships in the sectors and the numbers that they want. We expect the number of modern apprenticeship places to at least double in the coming year.

Youth training offers 16 and 17-year-olds the opportunity to receive training leading to a recognised vocational qualification of at least NVQ level 2 or equivalent. It is essential in supporting longer-duration training to intermediate skill levels and provides a foundation for further learning.

Progression from youth training to modern apprenticeships is available for those who show promise and will benefit from that more demanding training option.

Despite its many good features, there is scope to improve youth training. The Dearing review recognised that, but showed that we have been trying to do two jobs with youth training—delivering high-quality work-based training for those ready to benefit from it, and providing opportunities to reach first base for those who have fallen behind or are unclear about their way forward when they reach the age of 16. He suggested—and we agreed—that those two strands be developed separately.

National traineeships will provide high-quality, work-based training to NVQ level 2, along with the key skills of communication, number and information technology that employers are always telling us they need in new recruits.

Entry provision will be developed to provide a flexible range of local opportunities to meet the needs of young people who are not yet ready, or unclear about their future. The next step after entry may well be into a national traineeship—but might equally be back into full-time education. A flexible approach, driven by the needs of the individual, must lie at the heart of this exciting new initiative and we are already aware of many examples of good work on which we can build.

The Government welcome the recommendations and will consult widely during the summer on the detail of implementing the new arrangements, which we intend to phase in from September 1997.

I refer now to the careers service. We are providing a diverse range of opportunities after the age of 16. In that environment, effective careers education and guidance is more crucial than ever. One of the main reasons why people drop out of post-16 courses is that they have made the wrong choice. We want to help them make the right choice in the first place. Careers education and guidance helps to ensure that they make the most appropriate choice about their learning and occupational options.

We have reformed the careers service. Nearly all services are now on contract. The new arrangements encourage more efficient and effective careers advice and guidance, which is more adaptable to the changing needs of employers and young people.

The Government are committed to improving careers education and guidance even further. We intend to introduce legislation to improve careers education and guidance in maintained schools and colleges, in particular by securing the provision of careers education in maintained schools, making schools and colleges responsible for working with the careers services and providing facilities for them and ensuring that young people receive information on work-based and further education options.

That is another sector that benefits from the merger between the former Education and Employment Departments. We have a co-ordinated approach to careers education and guidance, which can make a significant contribution to the country's economic performance in future years.

It now remains for me to draw together the different strands of achievements and activity. Over the past 15 years, there has been a dramatic revolution in attitudes to staying on in education and training after the age of 16. We now have close on 90 per cent. of 16-year-olds, 80 per cent. of 17-year-olds and 60 per cent. of 18-year-olds taking part in education and training. The introduction of modern apprenticeships, GNVQs and NVQs has encouraged more young people to continue their learning.

In 1995, 67 per cent. of young people achieved five good GCSEs or the vocational equivalent and some 44 per cent. achieved two GCE A-levels or the vocational equivalent. Those represent substantial increases in attainment over the past decade. In addition, more than 1 million NVQ certificates have been awarded.

That is all good and positive. It is good for the young people who are realising their potential, and good for Britain as we develop the highly skilled work force that we need to compete effectively in the international marketplace into the next century. The proposals in the Dearing report will help us to do even better in future.

The nation must recognise that the effectiveness of our education and training, the skills of our work force and the competitiveness of the United Kingdom are inextricably linked. We need to get the best from the education and training system for young people so that it will stand comparison with our competitors.

Within 16-to-19 learning, the Government believe that fair competition and freeing up providers to exercise fuller managerial discretion will drive up standards and improve provider responsiveness to customer needs.

Last May's White Paper, "Competitiveness: Forging Ahead", set out a range of measures to improve individual choice, fair competition between providers and the relevance of provision to the needs of the labour market. They include action to improve the coverage and effectiveness of careers education and guidance in maintained schools and colleges, to improve the link between the bodies responsible for quality assurance of schools, further education and work-based training and to investigate the scope for making funding levels and systems for the various forms of post-16 learning more consistent.

I have outlined a series of interlinking measures that the Government continue to take to build on the success already achieved in the provision of education and training for 16 to 19-year-olds. We have a combination of improved staying-on rates in education, improved training opportunities and improved access by employers to modern apprenticeships—all of which help to provide an increased opportunity and quality of outcome for the crucial 16 to 19-year-old age group. That, combined with what we are doing in further and higher education and the increased awareness by employers of the importance of the skills of their work force, gives us a real opportunity to make material improvements in the skills of our work force and of our 16 to 19-year-olds in the years ahead. I commend all those measures to the House.

10.4 am

Mr. Bryan Davies (Oldham, Central and Royton): The Labour party very much welcomes today's debate. There is no doubt that the education and training of 16 to 19-year-olds must be an important priority, as it is one of the most critical issues for our nation today and into the 21st century. Our success or failure in future decades depends on the opportunities that we give our young people today.

The education and training opportunities afforded to young people should provide a platform of learning throughout their lives. They need a secure foundation of educational attainment so that they are equipped to thrive and prosper throughout their careers.

We all recognise that the career patterns that will develop in the modern economy will be different from those of the past. Education is no longer for life for some at 16, for others at 18, for a diminishing number at 21 and for a very small number beyond. Education for life will mean providing opportunities for people throughout their lives. A commitment to education and retraining must be part of the perspective in developing opportunities in the new economy. Therefore, it is essential that we establish opportunities for people that will enable them to acquire basic educational skills and qualifications and will provide them with a framework within which they can maximise their employability and increase their opportunities for developing their education and skills after they have left full-time education.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the hon. Gentleman clarify something for me? He referred to a diminishing number of people attending university or higher education at the age of 21. Is it not the case that when Labour last left office, only one in eight were in full-time education at the age of 21 and now the figure is one in three? What point was the hon. Gentleman trying to make?

Mr. Davies: The hon. Gentleman is misinterpreting me. I was referring not to participation rates in higher education, but to the qualifications structure in educational opportunities and the fact that fewer people participate in higher levels of education than in lower levels. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for helping me to clarify that.

Despite what the Minister said this morning, the Government's performance in the education of our 16 to 19-year-olds has been lamentable. Britain has fewer people aged 16 to 17 in full-time education than any other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development country, with the sole exception of Turkey. So the numbers of which the Minister was boasting in terms of participation beyond 16 in full-time education are extremely poor in comparison with those of other counties.

Mr. Forth: I suspected that the hon. Gentleman might parade that figure. Like most of the figures that the Opposition produce these days, it is highly selective and somewhat convoluted. Does he agree that simply to quote the number of those in education beyond 16 does not necessarily bear any relationship to the needs of individuals, as many young people benefit more from leaving full-time education at 16 and getting jobs or

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entering training? Therefore, the fact that a certain number are not in full-time education after 16 does not necessarily tell us much at all.

Mr. Davies: It tells us a great deal. It tells us that the evaluation made by other countries of the time that their young people need to be in full-time education is quite different. If the Minister is suggesting that people go into worthwhile jobs with developmental prospects at the age of 16, he is not looking at the statistics closely. It is clear that a large number of people employed at 16 are in dead-end jobs that offer no training. It is clear also that a large proportion of that age group remain unemployed significantly longer. Those substantial issues must be addressed, and I shall dwell on them later.

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that the hon. Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown) was wrong when he suggested recently that 80 per cent. of the children of unskilled parents leave school at 16? That was the figure under the last Labour Government, but today more than half such children stay in full-time education.

Mr. Davies: If the hon. Gentleman will contain himself and give me time to develop my argument, I shall refer to that specific point later. I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman attaches such importance to it. Conservative Members are at last waking up to the scandal of the number of young people who have left full-time education and of how many of them come from less advantaged homes. Those young people deserve our attention, concern and resources, but the Government have scandalously neglected them over a long period.

By age 17, only 50.9 per cent. of young people in England and Wales remain in full-time education, so we need to address that high drop-out rate. By age 18, the figure falls to just 38 per cent. When we emphasise the need for young people to achieve higher standards than in the past, and when we take delight in marginal improvements in recent years for which the Government would ordinarily take credit, the Secretary of State is quite unable to praise the education system, commend parents and congratulate young people on their achievements each summer. Conservative Back Benchers are more concerned to claim that education standards are dropping and that young people only appear to be achieving more because standards have slipped. That extremely unfortunate development in Conservative party thinking is part and parcel of the reason for the Government's education and training strategy being hopelessly flawed, having a performance well below the required level.

Mr. Michael Stephen (Shoreham): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that basic education standards have slipped because, although central Government must provide the money and carry responsibility, the actual education is delivered for the most part by left-wing local authorities, which are still employing the half-baked education theories of the 1960s?

Mr. Fabricant: Answer that.

Mr. Davies: It is interesting that the hon. Member for Shoreham (Mr. Stephen) is not alone in his outrageous remarks and receives commendation for such statements from other Conservative Members. Does the Minister claim that A-level performance levels in recent years reflect the failure of the education system? After all, the Conservatives have been in power and controlling the education system for 17 years, so they are certainly responsible. If the hon. Gentleman is trying to make an obscure point about the quality of teaching, I may point out that his Government were in power during the period when the vast majority of practising teachers were trained. If that issue is so significant, why did not the hon. Gentleman challenge the Minister to account for the situation?

Mr. Forth: The hon. Gentleman asked whether I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Shoreham (Mr. Stephen), so I shall set the record straight. Yes, I do agree. I shall pick two local education authorities at random—Islington and Southwark. Those LEAs, which are under Labour control, have received some of the highest funding per pupil of any authority in the country, yet they have let down generations of pupils to such an extent that caring parents, exercising parental choice, have removed their children from Islington and Southwark to send them to other London boroughs. The hon. Gentleman knows that that is the case because he has daily contact with those caring parents. That is a measure of education under Labour, which my hon. Friend had in mind.

Mr. Davies: The hon. Member for Shoreham may have done, but the Minister is in contact with a large number of other caring parents—and I assume that his colleagues on the Conservative Benches are also caring parents. They have such confidence in the Minister that they make sure that their children contract out from anything to do with the education system for which the Minister is responsible.

Mr. Forth *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Davies: The Minister is indicating that he did not contract out. What a gesture of faith that represents. Why is the Minister so unsuccessful in convincing the vast majority of his colleagues of his achievements? The Minister made no reference to the most worrying statistic of recent years, and I did not notice Conservative Members eager to interject on that point.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cirencester and Tewkesbury) *rose—*

Mr. Davies: I want to get this statistic out first, then the hon. Gentleman—having internalised my point—may intervene.

Last year, for the first time in living memory, the percentage of 16-year-olds staying on in full-time education fell. We saw not just a slowing in the growth of participation rates but a reversal, which will have knock-on effects for achievement at 17 and 18.

Mr. Fabricant: Is it possible that those young people were anticipating, God forbid, a Labour Government together—[*Laughter.*]—with the shadow Chancellor's tax on sixth formers?

Mr. Davies: The hon. Gentleman got the answer that he deserved, in the mirth that his question evoked.

Nearly 8 per cent. of pupils failed to gain any GCSE passes in 1993-94. Those youngsters are among the 12 per cent. of school leavers who fall into economic inactivity or enter jobs without training. Nearly one in eight school leavers is lost to the education and training system, and the future is bleak for such young people. They are most at risk of long-term unemployment or dead-end, low-skill, low-wage jobs. Those youngsters are most likely to fall into criminal activity. Society seems to offer them so little that their commitment to society and its values tends to be low. They are a lost generation, which is why our policies are addressed significantly to that group. The facts tell it all. There are 600,000 unemployed people between the ages of 18 and 25—one in six of that age group. Some 265,000 people in that age group have been unemployed for more than a year.

Conservative Members should realise that that situation is a ticking time-bomb. A huge number of people have missed out on educational achievement and are drifting into permanent exclusion from mainstream society. If they occupy such a role, is it any wonder that we have seen a growth in anti-social activity among them?

Mr. Forth: Will the hon. Gentleman go on to make comparisons between the figures that he has given for this country and the figures for youth unemployment in other European countries, which no doubt some Labour Members—if not he—would hold out as a model? I hope that he will then go on to tell us what impact he thinks that the statutory national minimum wage proposed by the Labour party would have on the very people whom he is identifying as being disadvantaged.

Mr. Davies: The Minister should recognise that the thrust of Labour party policy is in sharp contrast to what he has identified as his priorities. He seems to think that the issue in relation to 16-year-olds may be partially resolved by a small increase in the number of full-time jobs that require no training.

Labour Members say that there are clear solutions to the issues. We cannot have people in jobs without adequate training, and we cannot afford the substantial drop-out rates in education beyond 16. The simple fact—the Minister knows that it is the case—is that, in future, there will not be jobs for young people who have no educational attainments. Unskilled jobs are being swept away, year after year. We cannot conceive of solving the problem of increasing employment prospects if people do not have basic skills. That is why it is so important that we should direct ourselves to providing the necessary opportunities for educating and training our young people.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Mid–Kent): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davies: I shall give way in a moment, although I have given way several times already.

The Government do not recognise, and have totally ignored, the problem. We cannot ignore that policy inertia any longer. We must offer that group of young people new hope, which of course means improving staying-on rates in education for all our young people. It means reaching out to those who are disaffected and do not participate, and, in particular, it means tackling the social inequalities that still scar our education performance.

Mr. Rowe: The hon. Gentleman is making a very important point. I would not belittle at all the danger of allowing so many young people to emerge from school without any significant qualification, but he should not over-egg the pudding. There is clear evidence—from experience and from figures—that a great many young people, once they have experience of the labour market and its disciplines, come back to take advantage of precisely the type of flexible education and training market that he spoke of at the start of his speech.

Mr. Davies: That was an extremely constructive intervention—the first from a Conservative Member today. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is important that we create a framework in which people can re-enter education and develop opportunities after they have experienced employment. However, we are concentrating on this specific group of people because it is palpable that far too many of them drop out from education at 16. Given their disaffection with the education experience and the Government's limited efforts in the past to encourage them back into education and training, standards are lower than I should like them to be. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman joins me in realising that.

We must recognise that social inequalities still scar our education performance. To take the most obvious example, the gap has widened in recent years between the staying-on rates of students with the same GCSE results, according to their social background. In recent years, among young people with medium-range results at GCSE—which are five or more passes, but only one to four of those at grades A to C—the gap in staying-on rates has widened from 11 to 17 per cent., according to whether they come from better-off homes or socially deprived homes. We cannot have a situation in which education opportunities and training prospects are leaving people from the most disadvantaged groups further and further behind. If the Minister does not wish to intervene on that point, I shall explain to him precisely what we shall do to tackle the problem. I want him to recognise that the problem exists, and that he did not deal with it at all in his speech.

Mr. Tim Smith (Beaconsfield): Does the hon. Gentleman not understand that his combined proposals to abolish child benefit for 16 and 17-year-olds while simultaneously introducing a national statutory minimum wage will shift the balance of advantage away from full-time education to employment, and therefore widen the gap to which he has referred?

Mr. Davies: If the hon. Gentleman has not followed recent discussions on the development of Labour party plans in that area to understand how we shall increase resources for that disadvantaged group, he has not been reading newspapers and following the debate with sufficient care, as he should do.

The fact is that if educational attainment at GCSE level is poor, one has far less chance of staying on and gaining decent qualifications if one comes from a lower-income household. The situation is getting worse, which is why

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the Labour party is directing a great deal of its attention to it. The shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer has given particular emphasis to this issue.

Britain cannot meet national targets for education and training on current performance rates. Trends suggest that participation levels will continue to stagnate or even reverse without radical change. One academic commentator stated:

"To reach a standstill nationally in the mid to late 1990s"—

which is the current position—

"will mean falling further behind internationally as other countries continue to improve at a faster rate. The modest improvements which have taken place since 1987 will not produce any real competitive advantage."

I challenge the Minister to respond to that.

Today, the Minister mentioned the catalogue of the Government's achievements in developing skills in our young people, but the fact is that we are not keeping pace with our international competitors.

Mr. Forth: The hon. Gentleman has challenged me, so on this occasion, I shall happily respond.

I am looking at the Labour party's document, "Labour's New Deal for a Lost Generation: Key Points", which states:

"Our education and training system must ensure 100 per cent. of young people are on the road to a qualification."

I assume that he will explain what that means.

Presumably, the hon. Gentleman will also answer the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Smith). We are waiting anxiously for the hon. Gentleman to tell us how he will ensure that the differences in achievement between the different social groups that he mentioned a moment ago will somehow magically be eliminated, unless it is by reducing standards and compromising on qualifications to ensure that the people he approves of get qualifications of the type that he thinks are useful. Otherwise, what is the meaning of the expression:

"100 per cent. of young people are on the road to a qualification"?
Mr. Davies: That speaks volumes for the Minister's understanding of the problems that face us all. A large number of young people drop out of full-time education before they should for reasons related to the financial circumstances of their families. If the Minister does not realise that, I do not know which planet he lives on. Local authorities are losing their capacity to provide educational maintenance allowances, and transport support is in danger of collapsing.

I offer the Minister some figures. I am talking about the 16-plus group, not about students in higher education. I shall restrict my statistics to local authority support for the crucial group that we want to stay on in education beyond 16. The value of educational maintenance allowances paid to young people staying on after 16 declined by 20 per cent. between 1993 and 1994. So, owing to Government policies, young people discovered that they had even fewer opportunities to stay on in full-time education.

From time to time, Conservative Back Benchers draw the attention of the House to the parlous state of discretionary awards for young people. There has indeed been a huge decline in such awards in recent years. In 1992, they were worth £170 million, but that had declined by last year to £113 million. Yet that is essential support for the group to which we are supposed to attach priority.

Mr. Don Foster: The hon. Gentleman has told the House of his firm view that one of the problems in education and training relates to the difficult financial circumstances of families. I hope, then, that he may be able to enlighten us with his personal view of the suggested removal of child benefit. Surely that would worsen the financial circumstances of the very families about whom he is concerned.

Mr. Davies: If the hon. Gentleman will just contain himself, I shall identify precisely how we intend to increase resources to support those who need to keep their young people in full-time education.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): The hon. Gentleman has made it very clear that the financial circumstances of the deprived parents who want to keep their children on in school are affected by the amount of cash that their households receive. When the hon. Gentleman comes to advise the House about his party's proposal, will he therefore give a categoric assurance that those families will receive an amount in hard cash equal to, or more than, they get at the moment in child benefit? Will he explain how that will work, and what the sums involved would be? That is crucial if his policy is to retain any credibility at all.

Mr. Davies: The hon. Gentleman, too, must contain himself. I have already said that I shall deal with that when I get to the relevant section of my speech. We intend to give additional support to this group to improve participation rates in education.

Let us be clear about why the Government have no grounds for complacency when it comes to achievement. Over one third of our young people have not even reached level 2 attainment by the age of 19. That means that over a third have not even managed to get good GCSEs or vocational qualification passes at intermediate level—a complete failure on the part of Government. Level 2 attainment, as any decent employer knows, is the basic qualification enabling people to function effectively in any decent job. At higher levels, the situation is even worse.

In 1994, 41.5 per cent. of young people achieved level 3 qualifications—half the rate achieved in Japan—but it is at that very level that we need to achieve more if we are to develop our economy. For leading-edge international companies, level 3 is increasingly the bottom level of entry to the work force. Is it any wonder, therefore, after more than a decade and a half of Conservative government, that Britain now ranks 35th out of 48 in the World Economic Forum league table?

In order to bring about improvement, we must examine the current distribution of support for students in post-compulsory education. That is why Labour has stated its intention to review maintenance support. Our aim is clear: it is to increase fairness in public spending. The system of funding post-16 students is riddled with inequities and anomalies. Indeed, it scarcely merits the description of "system" at all. It is based on outdated assumptions about forms of study, and it displays an

historic bias towards those in full-time academic education. The relatively better-off do best out of the system. People who study part time or who do further education courses after 19 pay their own way.

Support for 16 to 19-year-old students is in disarray. In recent years, even the meagre support that used to be available has declined, and the discretionary grant system has almost collapsed. Local authorities no longer have the resources to provide the educational maintenance support that they used to provide just a few years ago.

Mr. Stephen: I had the privilege of being educated at two universities in the United States where most of my fellow students were Americans who received no support from central or local government. They were astonished by the generous provision that we make for our students. Not only do we pay all their fees, but we give them generous maintenance allowances. Bearing in mind the high standards of educational achievement at American universities, does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is not simply a question of throwing money at the problem?

Mr. Davies: It is certainly a question of improving our participation rates in higher education compared with those of America, Europe, Japan and the far east. The logic of the hon. Gentleman's proposition seems to be that we should reduce support even more to solve the problems—that amazes me.

If the Minister took the trouble to find out, he would learn from everyone who works in the sector that the most crucial element in post-16 education for people from deprived backgrounds is transport. *[Interruption.]* This may seem a trivial aspect to some Conservative Members, but for 16-year-olds from deprived backgrounds, their weekly bus fares to get to the colleges of their choice can present an acute problem. All educationists working in those colleges know how it acts as a deterrent to young people considering whether to persist with their courses.

Mr. Duncan: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davies: I have given way before to the hon. Gentleman and I must make progress. I am coming to the answer to the hon. Gentleman's question.

Funding pressure is such that local authorities now provide only £32 million in transport assistance. Getting to college is increasingly difficult for students from low-income households, and the colleges are being asked to pick up the tab for such support at a time when their budgets are extremely limited. Any Government concerned with improving staying-on rates would have tackled those problems, but the Government blandly assert that there does not appear to be a problem.

Although the issue of funding for students is vital, we must also address other issues. In particular, if the Government were serious about prioritising the sector of opportunity for young people, they would not have introduced the draconian cuts in further education in last year's Budget. The capital cuts in further education in the Budget amounted to £100 million over three years. That is two thirds of the capital budget, and there were substantial cuts in recurrent expenditure. That leads to a situation in which many of the students' problems are thrust on to the colleges, but the colleges do not have the wherewithal to respond effectively.

The Minister also discussed the issue of the reforms of the structure of post-16 education. I know him to be an avowed advocate of competition in educational provision, but the education sector for which he bears considerable responsibility finds a whole range of disfunctions in the present dog-eat-dog environment of provision for the post-16 age group. The competition is increasingly unhealthy, wasteful and destructive. Institutions are under pressure to recruit students in such a way that many do not offer to students the levels of impartial advice that they need, and part of the cause of the drop-out rate is that students are recruited to inappropriate courses. At the same time, institutions in a locality can offer courses to attract students from their competitors even though those institutions have neither the experience nor the ethos to provide those courses as well as others, with the result that courses are simply duplicated. That is not efficient: it is a waste.

Nor is there any structure for sensible partnership or a strategic overview of local provision. Everything depends on the marketplace, which means that certain courses, especially courses that are intensive in their use of staff or capital, are cut back or abandoned.

Mr. Forth: I am following the hon. Gentleman's points carefully. I assume that he will answer the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) about a commitment to cash for less well-off families. The hon. Gentleman seems to have moved on to another part of his argument, but he has yet to answer that question. My hon. Friends and I are waiting most anxiously to hear, in detail, the commitments that the hon. Gentleman will make to address the problem that he identified earlier.

Mr. Davies: The Minister must allow me to make my speech in my way. I have said clearly that we attach great priority to the matter, and that is why the party is developing a review of funding arrangements. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] We are developing a review for the funding of the post-16 age group with the clear intention of allocating additional resources to certain categories of students. We have made it clear that the present system is also selective. *[Interruption.]* If Conservative Members do not recognise that the present system discriminates in favour of the relatively better-off, they do not understand the issues.

We also need to address the structure of institutions that provide education at the post-16 level. We need to develop structures of partnership—

Mr. Fabricant: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for someone to mislead the House by saying that he will answer a specific point and then later saying—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Geoffrey Lofthouse): Order. That is a bogus point of order because, as the hon. Gentleman well knows, hon. Members are responsible for their speeches.

Mr. Davies: The funding levels and methodologies, regulatory systems and forms of accountability differ between colleges, schools and private training providers. The structure is incoherent and fragmented.

Mr. Duncan: Like the shadow Cabinet.

Mr. Davies: The concept of democratically accountable, co-ordinated and efficient public service has

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all but disappeared. I notice that Conservative Members cannot address their minds to the weaknesses of the system. They should make no mistake about the fact that such damaging competition is bad for students. It means that a full range of properly co-ordinated learning opportunities may not be available. It means that providers have to fight against their environment to put the needs of the learner first.

We shall provide a structure of partnership and co-operation in tertiary education. We need coherent, high-quality and democratically accountable education services and we believe that the education needs of students must come first. That is why the change in the structure of the curriculum is so important. Labour welcomed many of the recommendations of the Dearing review of 16 to 19-year-old qualifications. It was long overdue. Our policies share points with Dearing, but in other areas, our emphasis is different.

The structure of the curriculum is vital to participation and achievement. The triple-track system of A-levels, GNVQs and NVQs is inflexible, confusing and complex. It does not allow for transfer between courses, the building up of credits for achievement, or the opportunity to combine options in a coherent way. The system is partially responsible for the high drop-out rates that are a waste of talent, effort and public resources.

One feature that we should recognise when we measure the achievement of young people at A-level is that 30 per cent. of young people do not successfully complete their A-level courses and have no qualifications to show for any achievement short of an A-level pass. Progression between levels 2 and 3 of GNVQs is especially poor. Since 1992, less than a quarter of students have gained full awards out of nearly 260,000 registrations. Greater coherence is clearly necessary in the 14 to 19-plus curriculum. So too is breadth of learning, the opportunity to combine options and gain credits for partial achievement and the attainment of key skills for all students.

We must ensure that there is broader academic study post-16; that vocational qualifications are upgraded and enhanced; and that there is a single, coherent framework for qualifications. We must recognise that the Minister's much vaunted youth training scheme is a failure. It has low status and it is inadequate. It is public money badly spent. Labour will scrap it and will devote the resources to a new Target 2000 programme, the importance of which my hon. Friend the Member for Wallsend (Mr. Byers) will describe later in the debate.

We must recognise that training and education need to be developed more substantially than in any way that the Government have conceived so far. We shall develop a fresh strategy for the training of young people beyond 16 in place of the youth training system. We are committed to using a windfall levy on the excessive profits of the private utilities to fund a programme of education and employment for the young long-term unemployed. We shall offer four new options for those young people to ensure that no young person is out of work for more than six months, including a full-time education option; an employment with training option; a voluntary sector option, with improved education or training; and an environmental task force option. Those measures will give new hopes to the young unemployed.

Unlike the present discredited Tory Government, a Labour Government will face the global challenge to reach ever higher levels of achievement in education. We shall not let young people drift out of school into unemployment or unskilled oblivion. We shall offer a stake to all, high standards and real opportunities to learn and achieve. The country cannot prosper and succeed in any other way.

10.49 am

Dame Angela Rumbold (Mitcham and Morden): During my 20 years of involvement in education I have rarely listened to three-quarters of an hour of such unmitigated drivel. If the hon. Member for Oldham, Central and Royton (Mr. Davies) has set out the proposals that the Labour party is offering for the future education and training of our young people, I despair. I hope that my right hon. and hon. Friends will take every opportunity to make it plain to young people that the chances that they have under any putative Labour Government are nil.

I read Sir Ron Dearing's report with a great deal of interest. Like the hon. Member for Oldham, Central and Royton, I studied the table set out on page 3, which contains various targets and tables.

It is extremely important for us to concentrate on what the employer is looking for in young people when he considers taking them on as trainees or young people entering the work force. Before that stage is reached, however, we must ensure that there are jobs and employers who are active and able to provide new opportunities for young people who are entering the work force. That is the first lesson that the Labour party must take on board. Whatever other policies it pursues, the first and most important policy is to ensure that employers, industries and businesses can flourish in a climate that allows them to expand so as to provide opportunities for the youth of the future.

Secondly, we must concentrate on what is happening elsewhere in the world, and not merely in Europe. We are fond of taking note of what is happening in education in France and Germany, but we could learn many more lessons by taking account of what is happening in the emerging Pacific rim countries. I spent some time in Japan early in my time in the Department for Education. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister has been to Pacific rim countries on a number of occasions. It will not have escaped his notice, as it did not escape mine, that in those countries young people, when they are in school, are given a clear understanding of what the world at work is all about.

To meet the challenges of the world at work, young people of the Pacific rim countries are trained in basic skills. They are expected to be competent in numbers, reading, writing and managing their own languages. They are trained to be competent in the basic skills that any employer will require before he or she starts training them for the tasks that are carried out in the business.

It is no use us mouthing great words about what we shall do for people who have missed out when they are aged 16, 18, 19 or 21. That is too late. By the time that they are 16, young people must have acquired basic skills. Over the past year we have at least put into place structures within our schools for young people to obtain basic qualifications. It is a fact that it has been difficult to take the education establishment along with us in ensuring

that teachers understand the importance of making certain that every child, of whatever background, understands that the goal that they are set when they go to school is that of acquiring basic skills and having them at their fingertips.

The task of acquiring basic skills does not rest with parents alone. It is the task of the teacher to remember that when a child comes into his or her class it is necessary to set the goal to which I have referred. It is not good enough for us constantly to say that we must excuse 40 per cent. of children for not achieving what they should be achieving because there is a social reason for lack of achievement.

Mr. Rowe: One of the problems is that teachers are thoroughly confused. They think that it is extremely important, especially when damaged children enter their schools, to enable pupils to learn social skills that will allow them to succeed in the community. They forget that part of those social skills is the capacity to read, write and figure. If they do not have those skills to hang on to, they will not succeed. They are as important as learning how to do up their fly buttons or taking on board any other part of their social commitment.

Dame Angela Rumbold: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. He has put his finger exactly on the point. I can understand the confusion of teachers and I am not condemning them. I think, however, that many of them have been misled over a number of years by a tremendous amount of rubbish that has been put out in training colleges and elsewhere about the nature of a teacher's job. Their role is to ensure that the young people passing through their hands have basic knowledge. It is not a matter of being able to do up one's shoelaces. That can be learnt at any time. I will not refer to my hon. Friend's example.

It is important for young people to learn more than to read, write and do sums, although those skills form a critical part of their education. It is important for them to learn how to mix within a community, how to adopt a corporate form of behaviour, how to address people and how to recognise the social acceptability of their behaviour. Those requirements are partly the responsibility of the school, and a very large responsibility of parents.

Mr. Don Foster: The right hon. Lady has rightly said that it is important to take full account of the skills that are required by employers. One of my concerns about Sir Ron Dearing's report—I shall be interested to know whether the right hon. Lady is similarly concerned—is that although he referred to key skills, employers were saying that in addition people should have the ability to work with others. Employers talked also about self-development and problem solving. Does the right hon. Lady agree that these are important core skills that should be pursued in schools?

Dame Angela Rumbold: I do not dispute that. Sir Ron Dearing rightly drew attention to those skills. It is more important that young people learn how to behave and deport themselves within the world at large, and especially within the world of work, than to acquire a series of computing skills at a training college or during a training course.

Most children aged five years are beginning to learn how to use VDUs these days. It is not a great skill.

It is a mistake on the part of those who are trying to "do good" by the youngsters who have not managed to achieve proper basic skills within the school system to think that that can be compensated for by introducing them to a training scheme that may or may not, and probably will not, lead them into a job at the end of the day.

Mr. Fabricant: Was my right hon. Friend as horrified as I was on reading an article written by Stephan Shakespeare, in which he referred to the primacy of ensuring that reading, writing and arithmetic be taught to youngsters? I shall quote a tiny part of the article, which states:

"even the word 'reading'"—

this is a trendy socialist—

"has been challenged and lampooned as 'barking at text' in that children who could merely read were like dogs"—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman should not be reading from a newspaper.

Dame Angela Rumbold: I understand the point that my hon. Friend is trying to make, which is that political correctness has entered the classroom. Indeed, much to my regret, it is to be found throughout society. Unmitigated drivel is talked about political correctness.

I should like to pursue the point about what the employer wants. Like every other hon. Member, I visit the businesses and industries in my constituency. Apart from asking how they are doing, and finding out whether they have orders in their order books, I consistently ask them what sort of young employee they are looking for. They do not run off a great string of qualifications. If I ask about general national vocational qualifications, the majority of them look at me with a blank face and say, "Yes, I am sure that it is a good qualification." The vast majority will say that they expect young people to have O-levels. One or two who are young enough and have children going through the present system will remember that O-levels have changed to GCSEs. Others will say that A-levels are a good thing, but they do not particularly look for employees with A-levels. They look for young people who want to come and work and be trained; who are willing to undertake the task, not necessarily for ever and a day, but who are motivated. No one in the Chamber this morning has talked about the motivation of young people. We need to talk about motivation before we go into any report such as Sir Ron Dearing's or produce any number of different qualifications that confuse the young person as much as they clearly confuse the employer.

We must seek to create a motivated core of young people who understand the basic needs of the employer and that, in order to meet those needs, they must work when they go to school.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I have been following closely what my right hon. Friend has to say. Like her, I visit employers in my constituency. I agree with her about motivation, but does she agree that other basic skills are lacking such as interview skills and how to prepare a CV? Employers find that too many of our youngsters leave our education system without those basic skills in finding a job.

Dame Angela Rumbold: I put all those skills together within what I have consistently talked about, namely,

[Dame Angela Rumbold]

preparation of young people by schools to meet the challenges of the world of work. Schools should not try to take children into industries or to emulate the world of work. They have no idea about the world of work. That has been demonstrated without question in the past 30 years. What schools are good at is teaching the basic skills. I firmly believe that they should stick to that and leave the employers to do the training.

I should like to examine not only what employers want but the question of qualifications, which Sir Ron Dearing has studied with great care. He did as good a job as he could under the circumstances, but I have considerable doubt about the obsession in this country with qualifications of all these different sorts. I am not absolutely convinced that we need to have so many different qualifications other than to satisfy those people who like to dream them up and write the pieces of paper on which they sign the name of the student.

Qualifications are of use only if they mean something. Everyone knows what a degree from a university means. A degree is not as good as it used to be because, for some absurd reason, in a country of this size, which previously had 43 perfectly good universities, we now have more than 100 universities. A larger number of people now go through university and obtain a degree.

In schools we have a consistent test which retains its standard. It has been whittled away, because these things always are, but we have the consistent A-level gold standard. I was concerned to see in Sir Ron Dearing's report a hint of a structure to whittle away further that gold standard. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to beware. If we start to mix up the academic with the theoretical and practical, we will lose the quality of academic achievement that youngsters attain in A-levels.

Mr. Forth: I assure my right hon. Friend that as long as this Government are in power, there will be no compromise and no tinkering with the essentials of the A-level. I hope that she has not confused—as I am sure that she has not—the desire that Sir Ron Dearing has expressed to provide underpinnings to the A-level to give a somewhat broader approach than the narrow, purist approach which has prevailed until now with a desire to change the standard of the A-level. As I said in my speech, the A-level must remain the core and anchor of our school education system. To that, we are absolutely committed.

Dame Angela Rumbold: I am extremely reassured to hear that from my hon. Friend the Minister. I am a purist, so I hope that some of the A-levels will remain pure. We should never deny to young people in our schools and universities who are really good and can achieve something that is meaningful the opportunity to achieve the highest academic qualifications at whatever level. That is incredibly important for the survival of any country, but it is most important for this country because we have a long and very good history as a country that produces great ideas, great scientists, great musicians, and great people in literature, art and drama, and we should be immensely proud of that. We have achieved that by ensuring that we retain the highest quality in our education system.

However, all that is not to say that we do not have to provide qualifications for others who are not quite so highly skilled and clever. I am very much in favour of providing qualifications for those people, but we must be careful not to introduce too many different qualifications, not to confuse the employer and not, believe it or not, to throw away some of the more modest qualifications which employers have become used to and understand. There is nothing wrong with allowing youngsters who are not high fliers in the academic world to obtain a BTEC. It is a good, proper qualification that will allow them to go forward and—to follow up the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe)—might attract them back into education later.

There is no doubt that people want to return to education from time to time. There is nothing new about that. Anyone would think that we were creating a totally new world, but we are doing what we have always done. Many people have decided at some stage later in their lives to do a second degree or qualification. That has been consistently the case over the years. I cannot understand why we suddenly assume that, with the advent of new technology, which has been the most difficult revolution, we should reinvent the wheel or invent a new wheel.

Mr. Fabricant: I fully understand my right hon. Friend's argument and that of my hon. Friend the Minister about retaining purist academic A-levels, but does she agree that there is no mutual exclusivity between AS-levels, which broaden academic education, and the purist academic qualification for entry into university? Does she agree that Sir Ron Dearing may have hedged his bets between A and AS-levels? Does she accept that although she might think that A-levels are a gold standard, they have restricted Britain to being a nation which is good at research but not at development because we do not have the broad base that is so necessary in this modern day and age among people entering university?

Dame Angela Rumbold: I do not agree with my hon. Friend. There is no evidence to suggest that we have not been particularly good at development because we lack a broad education at A-level. I have always been in favour of AS-levels, because they offer students an opportunity to study a broader curriculum.

The last point on which I wish to concentrate is what young people want. We ask ourselves what employers want and talk about qualifications, but the other component has to be what young people want. For the lucky top 30, 40 or 50 per cent. of youngsters, that does not necessarily present a great problem. In my experience, unless they are going into a specific profession such as the law, medicine or accounting, many young people who go on to higher education rarely know precisely what they want to do. A vast swathe of young people reads science or the arts without a clear idea of precisely where that will lead them, but what they do know and are reassured about is that, with a good degree, the chances are that they will get a well-paid job, which they will be able to use as a jumping-off point to any other career that they want during their lives.

The difficulty comes for youngsters who are not in that category and who have to think carefully about where they are going and what they are doing. What do we say to those young people? Unfortunately, they are not as well equipped with the basic skills at the ages 16, 17, 18 and

19 as they should be, so what are we offering them? My hon. Friend the Minister is offering them a range of training opportunities, but, before any young person goes on to take such an opportunity, they must understand that it will take them into work.

Going from school into a training opportunity seems a nice idea because it takes up another couple of years, but it does not take the person into a job. We need to consider closely young people's aspirations to find out whether they do understand what work is all about and whether they are prepared to accept the world of work as it is. Let us not mince our words—it is a difficult and tough life. It is true that some of those young people will not be able to go into high-flying jobs. Many girls will end up as receptionists, behind counters in retail shops or doing fairly menial tasks. Many lads will find themselves sweeping floors or doing menial tasks in the post room. We do ourselves no service by not facing up to what happens in the real world. We stand up in the House and talk about things without considering what is happening out there.

We would be well advised to consider what young people see as their opportunities. It is not surprising that many young people say, "I don't really want to sweep a floor, be a post boy or a tea boy. Why should I?" The Labour party wants to offer them all sorts of concessions and bonuses to go on to even more useless training schemes, but then, at the age of 21, they will suddenly discover that they will not be offered any better job than they would have been offered at 16. They could have spent those five years advancing from being a post boy to being a young manager.

It is clear, therefore, that the key to all this is to ask young people what they want and to attract them into the apprenticeship schemes, which are right—and I congratulate the Government on introducing those newly enhanced apprenticeship schemes at this stage. The apprenticeship scheme is a tried and tested way. We abandoned it but we are returning to it. It must be the way forward to ensure that many more young people, when they consider what the world of work is going to offer them, see something more than simply going on a scheme that may or may not—many of their friends will have been on these schemes—lead them into a job. We should say to them, "The employer will take you on. You can continue your formal education by having sandwich courses, training courses and days off for college, but you are learning a skill that will get you a job." That is what young people's training and education is all about.

As can see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I feel a certain amount of frustration today because I have been participating in these debates for about 20 years. There has been considerable advance—I congratulate the Government on the advances that they have made in the past 17 years—but I acknowledge that it is incredibly difficult to turn a ship round when in it is midstream and going in the opposite direction.

For far too long, we had wishy-washy nonsense about trendy ways of teaching children in primary schools, idiotic ways of teaching children in secondary schools, and half-baked schemes for taking them off the streets through training schemes and training colleges. Young people do not want to do any of those things. They want to be motivated. Most of them have high expectations.

I will not accept from anyone, certainly not from Labour Members, that young people do not have aspirations because of their social background and their unfortunate circumstances. The majority of young people have a high expectation of what they can achieve. They may see others around them not achieving and they may think that it will be difficult, but take me to a young child who does not have a fairly optimistic view of what he or she can or cannot achieve.

If young children are not shown such optimism by schools, teachers and the people surrounding them, that is a problem that we need to deal with far better than whingeing in the House and in other places about the deprivations of people who do not have an opportunity in future. Young people have always been able to climb out of their backgrounds, provided we give them the right climate, the right opportunities in schools, and jobs. That is what the Government have been pursuing during their years in office. We should be shouting from the rooftops to youngsters throughout the country that there is a future for them and that we will ensure both the jobs, the adequate schooling and the right amount of training and apprenticeships for them so that they have job opportunities that are meaningful and that will take them on to a good standard of life.

11.15 am

Mr. Keith Hill (Streatham): My next-door neighbour from Mitcham and Morden made a considered speech. In what is likely to be her swan-song, she concentrated on education rather than on training. I shall focus on training. I shall also take up her remarks about deprivation's effects on opportunity, about which a little more needs to be said.

The Minister made large claims about the Government's achievements in education, training and young people's employment prospects. Few of those achievements are recognised by either young people or their parents. The charge against the Government, however, is not just one of ineffectiveness in the delivery of their policies on young people. The charge is one of deliberate and conscious neglect of their interests.

After all, this is the Government who scrapped minimum wage protection for 16 and 17-year-olds, who scrapped income support for the vast majority of them, who are the only Government in the European Union to oppose the directive against the exploitation of children and young people in employment, who, this year, will exclude 40,000 young people from gaining qualifications by clamping down on the 16-hour rule, and who, this year—incidentally, the Year of Lifelong Learning—are cutting £75 million from the training budget, on top of last year's cut of £200 million.

In few places in Britain is the Government's failure in employment and their failure in particular to equip young people for work more evident than in the part of south London that I represent. In the Streatham constituency, which includes part of Brixton, unemployment in general now stands at 16.3 per cent., well over twice the national average of 7.8 per cent., if we can believe that much massaged figure. One in three young people between the ages of 16 and 24 are unemployed. On some estates in our inner-city wards, half of all young people are out of work. Among young black men under 25, unemployment is at 60 per cent.

For black people, and perhaps for young black men especially, the lack of education and training qualifications resulting from social disadvantage is

[Mr. Keith Hill]

compounded by discrimination in the job market. That was clearly shown in the Trades Union Congress report, entitled "Black and Betrayed", on the black experience of unemployment. When black people complete training programmes, their job prospects are worse than those of white people.

In 1993-94, although the proportion of white people going into jobs, on completion of the training for work programme, was only a disappointing 37 per cent., for black people, it was even lower at 26 per cent. That is why I welcome Labour's plan to strengthen anti-discrimination legislation in employment practices, as well as its commitment to work with ethnic minority groups to introduce training schemes aimed at unemployment in the ethnic minority population.

Unemployment, lack of opportunity and loss of prospects on the scale that I have described lead to frustration and despair for the many and alienation and violence for the few. I do not condone the disturbances which occurred in Brixton on the night of 13 December last year and which spread to my constituency. I was able roundly to condemn the vandalism and criminality at Prime Minister's Question Time the following day and I shall continue to do that.

I emphasise that black and white young people were involved in the Brixton disturbances and, of course, only a small minority of young people were involved. I do not suggest that social factors alone contribute to the climate in which such events can occur. We ought to understand the social conditions that form the background to such events and the challenge that they represent. Children growing up in many communities and estates in our inner cities are highly likely to be surrounded by unemployment and, often, by real poverty. It is likely that their relatives, elders and role models, especially in the ethnic communities, will be long-term unemployed.

In such an environment, where even those who have taken the trouble to gain qualifications are out of work, is it surprising that such youngsters have exceptionally low expectations and tend to regard education and training with scepticism? Even those who gain decent GCSE grades at 16 find it difficult to move straight into the job market. The avenue of apprenticeships, which were once an option for high-quality training for those wishing to enter employment, has been closed to most school leavers for a long time.

For those who find jobs at the age of 16, the work is likely to be low paid and insecure. Although the Government have deemed that 16 and 17-year-olds should be in work, studying or training, nearly one in five are out of work, and for those who have left work, high-quality training is difficult to obtain. In inner-city areas in particular, both the TECs and the regeneration projects have failed to provide adequate training for many of the groups that most need it. Drop-out rates are extremely high and the numbers achieving the required NVQs are low.

All those background factors combine to create a culture of non-work and hostility to training. The trouble is that once a young person has dropped out of training and the education system, it becomes extraordinarily difficult to clamber back on to the qualifications ladder at a later stage. After several years of unemployment, a young person in that position may come to the realisation that only a job can provide the decent standard of living that he seeks, and he may try to return to education and training. However, reliance on welfare may make that virtually impossible, especially if the person has dependants.

Such people may find that they lack the basic skills that are needed to pursue an educational course or may simply be deterred by the requirement to refresh their skills before embarking on study, thus adding time to the period that is already needed to gain a qualification. The alternatives are to find low-paid, insecure work or to continue to rely on benefits. Thus the cycle of hopelessness, aimlessness and dependency is resumed and moulds the next generation. It is vital to equip our young people with the incentives and skills that are needed to break out of that vicious circle.

The cost of not providing our young people with a decent start in life and a stake in the economy is £10 billion a year, which we pay in unemployment and other benefits and in crime. That is equivalent to 5p in the pound for every basic-rate taxpayer. We are abandoning a significant part of a generation, leaving them alienated and adrift with no stake in society, but with the same material aspirations as their contemporaries. I repeat that there is no excuse for lawbreaking, but that we are creating the conditions in which crime breeds, and the inner city is everywhere in our society.

The Government are failing, even by their own standards, to give our young people the education and training that they deserve. We count the cost of that failure in terms of the blighted lives of individuals, social collapse and economic inefficiency. An economy such as ours has no future unless it maximises the intellectual skills of all its citizens, yet Britain has fewer 16 and 17-year-olds in full-time education than any OECD country other than Turkey. The Minister squirmed when my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham, Central and Royton (Mr. Davies) put that to him. The Minister suggested that there were other activities that were suitable for many young people. I suppose that they are dead-end jobs and unemployment, and that this is another case in which the Government have got it right and the rest of the world has got it wrong.

Mr. Tim Smith: How will the abolition of child benefit for 16 and 17-year-olds help to improve the figures?

Mr. Hill: It is bizarre that, for obvious, cheap scaremongering, the Conservative party is concentrating on a Labour party review that is designed to remove inequality in education and to assist low-income families and low-income young people to pursue education and training. In due course, we shall see the results of that extremely worthwhile activity. Until then, the hon. Gentleman will have to contain himself.

In Britain, only 59 per cent. of 17-year-olds remain in full-time education. That compares with 93 per cent. in Germany, 90 per cent. in Japan, 87 per cent. in France and 72 per cent. in the United States. They have all got it wrong, but we have obviously got it right. Every G7 country has more people in post-16 education than Britain, and by the age of 18, just 38 per cent. of young Britons are still in education.

It is perfectly clear that our training programmes are failing our young people. Only 46 per cent. of those who begin youth training complete the course. Nationally,

only 64 per cent. achieve NVQ level 2 by the age of 19, but the Government's target is 85 per cent. This year in Centec, which covers my part of south London following the collapse of the South Thames TEC—

Mrs. Bridget Prentice (Lewisham, East): The disastrous collapse.

Mr. Hill: My hon. Friend correctly observes that it was a disastrous collapse. I understand that she is likely to speak about that if she is called.

This year in Centec, more than 3,000 students left youth training while fewer than 2,000 achieved NVQs. But a Department for Education and Employment survey in London last year found that a quarter of employers felt that there was a skills gap in their work forces and new entrants. Nationwide, the same survey found that concern about skills shortages had risen by 75 per cent. among companies compared with a year earlier.

It is clear that British employers are increasingly alarmed by our failure to create the skilled work force that we need to meet the new challenges of technology. To meet that need, the Labour party has launched the new Target 2000 guarantee, to ensure that every young person who can achieve it attains NVQ level 2 by the age of 19. We shall redeploy the funding of the failing youth training programme to support that initiative.

We aim to ensure that, by the year 2000, every young person stays in education post-16. We shall reform the benefit system by relaxing the 16-hour week to encourage part-time studies. We shall also encourage volunteering, by allowing those on benefits to establish contact with the job market and a routine of work. I believe that that is fundamental.

Work is a habit, which may be lost for ever if it is not acquired at a relatively early age. That is why we in the Labour party are so fearful for the prospects of that potentially lost generation of 600,000 unemployed between the ages of 16 and 25. For that reason, we are proposing our new deal for the under-25s, to be funded by the proceeds of a windfall tax on the excess profits of privatised utilities.

On offer will be a job with at least one day a week of training, leading to a vocational qualification; a job with the voluntary sector, combining training with a weekly wage equal to benefit plus a fixed sum; similarly funded, a job with the environmental task force, involving young people in the regeneration of neighbourhoods most ravaged by vandalism and giving them a stake in their local community; or the option of full-time education and training.

Mr. Duncan: For the purposes of calculating the hon. Gentleman's proposed windfall tax—which, after the events of this week, is fast disappearing anyway—when is a profit an excess profit such that it is taxable in the way that he proposes?

Mr. Hill: When it emerges from a privatised monopoly. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] The events of this week have vindicated Labour's long-term claim that the privatised utilities were making money hand over fist in excess profits, so I make no apology for our commitment in that respect.

Labour in power will prioritise education and training, and the employment of the young. For the people whom I represent, and for our society and economy, there can be no higher priority. It is our only hope for the future.

11.32 am

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): I am delighted to have the opportunity to take part in this Government-inspired debate.

I begin by apologising to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and to the Under–Secretary of State for Social Security, my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Mr. Mitchell), for the fact that I am unable to stay for the winding-up speeches. I hope that my hon. Friend understands.

One of the few things that is agreed in all quarters of the House today is that young people are our great resource for the future. Although Eastbourne is rightly known as a delightful place to which one can retire, and about a third of my constituents are of retirement age, there are many and growing numbers of younger people in my constituency.

My job as the constituency Member is not only to secure things such as long-term health care for the elderly so that my older constituents can enjoy a long, happy and healthy active life, but to secure for my younger constituents, as far as I am able, a future of challenge, opportunity and fulfilment.

The latest figures show that about 75 16 to 18-year-olds are registered unemployed in Eastbourne. Of course, that is 75 too many, but it shows a substantial drop in unemployment in all sectors in my constituency in recent months, as is evidenced throughout the country—unemployment is at a five-year low. In Eastbourne, we have hovered around the 6 per cent. mark of unemployment, which is significantly better than other nearby towns.

Rightly, youth unemployment is at the heart of the debate. We are striving, as a Government, to reduce youth unemployment and to ensure that, when young people are unemployed, useful training is available to them. It must be said repeatedly that youth unemployment is much higher in the rest of Europe than in Britain. We all know, even if Opposition Members will not accept it, that youth unemployment will be especially badly hit by a national minimum wage, which the Labour party proposes.

A significant part of the local economy in Eastbourne is represented by hotels, restaurants and guest-houses, and the people who operate those businesses are adamant, when they speak to me, that a national minimum wage, far from enhancing employment, especially among the young, would have the opposite effect.

Mr. MacShane: Other than France and Spain, which European countries have higher youth unemployment than the United Kingdom?

Mr. Waterson: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, that is a bit like saying that, were it not for the iceberg, the Titanic would have won the Blue Riband race. He rightly mentioned France and Spain. He asks us to ignore youth unemployment at 38.2 per cent. in Spain and to put to one side the embarrassing fact that in France, the statistic is 27.7 per cent.

Mr. MacShane: Answer the question.

Mr. Waterson: I am preparing to answer it.

[Mr. Waterson]

Let us also remember that in Italy, the figure is between those, and not very different—36.5 per cent.

Mr. MacShane: That is three out of 15.

Mr. Waterson: Those are very substantial economies.

It is my contention that those unacceptable rates of youth unemployment are directly attributable to policies similar to those that the hon. Gentleman and his friends would introduce if they ever had the opportunity to do so.

Mr. Tim Smith: In answer to the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), the average of youth unemployment in all 15 member states of the European Union is nearly 21 per cent. The hon. Gentleman does not seem interested in averages, but that is the average. Youth unemployment in the United States of America is well below that level.

Mr. MacShane: Stick around; he will need you later.

Mr. Waterson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that penetrating intervention and his support.

Looking beyond the hotel industry and so on, a national minimum wage would have that effect. The hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) need not listen to me; he can listen to the Confederation of British Industry and other people who are even wiser on these matters than my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Smith). We should not introduce a minimum wage, let alone the horrors of the social chapter—but that, perhaps, is for another day.

Our task as politicians is to ensure, as far as possible, that our young people find proper standards of education and training, not only for their personal fulfilment, but to allow the UK to compete effectively in the modern world.

I recently went to a meeting upstairs addressed by Mr. Bob Ayling of British Airways, who announced many hundreds—if not thousands—of new jobs for British Airways based in and around Gatwick, not too far from my constituency. One of the tragic things he said was that, because British Airways now requires people interviewed for posts as cabin staff to speak at least one foreign language fluently, it now has to recruit for some of those jobs in places such as Holland, simply because in this country we still have not cracked the problem of young people—

Mr. MacShane: Seventeen years.

Mr. Waterson: I am not making a party political point.

Mr. MacShane: I am.

Mr. Waterson: The hon. Gentleman confirms that he is, from a sedentary position—it is good of him to drop in on his way to Geneva, Brightside or wherever.

For very many years, we as a country have failed to persuade our young people to take one or more foreign languages. That is even more of a tragedy in the context of the runaway success of a great privatised British company, in the shape of British Airways.

Hon. Members may have seen the youth cohort study that shows that now more than half of the children of unskilled workers remain in full-time education after their 16th birthday. We, as a country, are spending about £3.5 billion on further education and training for 16 to 19-year-olds.

Tomorrow, I shall visit the Eastbourne college of arts and technology in my constituency, which does excellent work, as does Park college, in providing a range of courses for these young people.

I shall say a word or two about the excellent work of Sussex Enterprise, which was brought about by the merger of the Sussex chamber of commerce and Sussex training and enterprise council. I pay tribute to the work of Alan Caffyn, Ken Caldwell, the chief executive and his staff. Sussex Enterprise works closely with the careers centre in Eastbourne. It has funded a job ready course at GrandMet Trust and Eastbourne college of art and technology, a job club for young people and an enhanced careers guidance and placement programme. It is intimately involved in the delivery of the successful 1994 single regeneration budget challenge fund, where Eastbourne won a significant amount of Government funding to deal with an array of problems in the constituency. It is focusing on the needs of young people as they enter the labour market in Eastbourne. There is special focus on two town centre wards—Devonshire and Upperton, where unemployment and multiple occupation are particularly prevalent.

I am told that in Sussex as a whole about 4,800 people are involved in job skills modern apprenticeship training, of whom about 10 per cent. train in the Eastbourne travel-to-work area. More than 90 per cent. of trainees who complete their NVQs are in work when they leave the programme, which is an excellent achievement. Leading companies such as Llewellyn the builders and Caffyn, which is a distributor of motor vehicles, have direct training contacts with Sussex Enterprise. It is estimated that another 300 local companies of all sizes are involved in offering jobs and training placements, but more are needed.

Only the other day, the Under–Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for South–East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice), visited my constituency. Among other things, he was able to see two modern apprentices at work at Johnson Pumps, where training is making a difference to the company as well as to the young people.

I hope that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will forgive me if I mention the figures for children staying on at school that prevailed between 1974 and 1978. I do so not for purely party political advantage, but simply because there has been a fundamental misunderstanding of the current trends, which has, I fear, brought about the recent disastrous policy announcement by the shadow Chancellor, the hon. Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown). When the Labour party was last in power, 80 per cent. of the children of unskilled parents left school at 16, but that is no longer the case. Sadly, at the John Smith memorial lecture on Friday 19 April this year, the hon. Member for Dunfermline, East claimed that 80 per cent. of the children of unskilled parents leave school at 16. That was true between 1974 and 1978, when Labour was last in power, but it is no longer true.

I intervened during the speech of the hon. Member for Oldham, Central and Royton (Mr. Davies) to ask whether he accepted that the shadow Chancellor's claim was an error. The hon. Gentleman gave a rather wordy response, but I think that the basic thrust of his answer was yes. It has to be accepted that that was a fundamental error in Labour policy planning.

Some 72 per cent. of children over the age of 16 stay on in education. All young people are guaranteed a place on the youth training scheme. Some 90 per cent. of 16-year-olds, 80 per cent. of 17-year-olds and 60 per cent. of 18-year-olds are now in full-time education or training. Those facts matter—particularly as they undermine the shadow Chancellor's recent policy announcement on child benefit, which has been raised in several interventions.

We heard from the shadow Chancellor that child benefit was to be removed for children between the ages of 16 and 17. According to my figures, 1 million families currently receive child benefit for 1.1 million children in that age range. As child benefit is set at £10.80 a week for the first child, that means that a family would lose £560 a year, or the equivalent of 5p in the pound. It is no wonder that the shadow Chancellor's announcement was criticised by people from across the board, including Sally Witcher, director of the Child Poverty Action Group. At the heart of the policy announcement is the fact that it would bear hardest on the less well-off parents of children who are currently at school. One quarter of families receiving child benefit for children aged 16 and over are on income-related benefits.

What has caused that massive confusion at the heart of Labour's education and social policy? We all know that, with a great fanfare, the hon. Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Mr. Smith), whose seat I once had the honour of fighting, was dispatched by the Leader of the Opposition to go off for six months and think the unthinkable. However, barely had he returned and unpacked his bags from wherever he had been—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Andrew Mitchell): Singapore.

Mr. Waterson: Singapore—I am told—and other exotic places.

Mr. Mitchell: Australia.

Mr. Waterson: And Australia.

No sooner had the hon. Member for Islington, South and Finsbury returned and unpacked his bags than we were told that, after six months of intense concentration, he had come to the firm conclusion that the subject was all very difficult and should be referred to a royal commission. He had barely made that pronouncement when his hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor, apparently with no reference to him, announced out of the blue proposals to withdraw child benefit for 16 to 18-year-olds. That policy would have precisely the effect that I described: the £560 could make all the difference for less well-off families; it could determine whether their child or children would stay in full-time education or go straight into the job market.

However, all was not lost. Today's Government-inspired debate has given us the opportunity to put the puzzling question to the hon. Member for Oldham, Central and Royton. He promised several times during his address that he would return to the question how he was to deal with the policy of removing £560 from people, particularly less well-off families. After some pressure from my hon. Friends, we have at last received a definitive statement on Labour policy. The Labour party is developing a review on the subject. I do not know quite what that means—it might be one of our old friends, a royal commission, rearing its ugly head. I think that it means, "We do not know the answer and we have been caught out."

Mr. Rowe: I hope that my hon. Friend is not being misled. Perhaps we are thinking of the wrong sort of review and perhaps the Labour party is developing a song-and-dance act to celebrate.

Mr. Waterson: My hon. Friend may be right—we are in the looking-glass world of Labour policy formulation.

One thing we know is that the policy announced—apparently without reference to those involved with social policy in the Labour party—was based on a fundamental misapprehension of the statistics and of the true, modern numbers of unskilled workers' children staying on at school. That announcement caused a furore, particularly as everyone who thought about it for more than 10 seconds realised that it would disproportionately affect the less well-off.

All that we have heard today is that the Labour party is developing a review. The Labour party knows that it made a mistake; it does not know how to get out of it, so for the moment, everything is on hold. That is disappointing. It is a disgrace and an insult to the House that the hon. Member for Oldham, Central and Royton has come here today, knowing that that would be the question on the lips of many hon. Members on both sides of the House, and fundamentally failed to address it.

11.48 am

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): As many hon. Members have said, to have a debate now on the education and training of 16 to 19-year-olds is extremely important and timely. I am sorry that the right hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame A. Rumbold) is not in her place at present as I have often been critical of her contributions in the Chamber. She made an extremely helpful and thoughtful contribution to the debate. I did not agree entirely with her remarks about A-levels, but I agreed with the rest of her speech. I think that her final point was one of the most critical made in this Chamber for a long time. She referred to the importance of having high expectations of young people. Sadly, I believe that we often do not expect enough of them. Young people often have high expectations and we fail them by not matching our expectations with theirs.

I am interested in the way in which the debate has concentrated on the issue of education and training for 16 to 19-year-olds and has not been hijacked by a debate on the Labour party's extremely confused and confusing position regarding child benefit. I share the concerns expressed by the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson), who said that that aspect of Labour policy was not clarified today. I intend to raise another query about Labour policy later in my speech. Perhaps it is helpful if I place firmly on the record my party's commitment to the continuation of child benefit.

[Mr. Don Foster]

It is a little rich for the hon. Member for Eastbourne to criticise any party for reviewing any policy area. After all, the debate has highlighted the clear inadequacies of the Government's policies in respect of education and training for 16 to 19-year-olds. The Government could offer no clear proposals and they were forced to appoint Sir Ron Dearing to conduct a review. The policies regarding further and higher education are also in a mess. The Government are not willing to explain to the electorate how they will solve that problem. They have put that whole policy area "on hold"—to use the hon. Gentleman's words—until Mr. Fixit, Sir Ron Dearing, conducts a review. We should not be unduly critical of reviews of policy areas. However, I hope that the Labour party will clarify its position soon.

Mr. Tim Smith: No one takes exception to the idea of a review. The Labour party's fundamental error was to pre-empt the results of the review by announcing that it would abolish child benefit for 16 and 17-year-olds without announcing also a replacement for it.

Mr. Foster: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, but he does not go far enough. The biggest problem was that certain Labour Members said one thing and, almost immediately, other Labour Members said another. That confused us even more than if the Labour party had gone in one direction and then changed its stance.

Today's debate is important because it has highlighted two problems in this country. We are well aware of the figures—they were repeated on many occasions in many different places—in the world competitiveness report. The report ranked our work force 24th in the world in terms of skill levels. Our education system came 35th out of 48 countries in terms of adequacy. That result was achieved after 17 years of Conservative government. It must be clear to us all that, if we are to halt the decline and to succeed in the increasingly global market, we must invest more in our most important resource: the people of this country. We must ensure that every individual can achieve his or her potential.

It would be foolish to say that there have been no changes or improvements. However, on the whole, the Government have failed to make the improvements that the country needs desperately. The hon. Member for Shoreham (Mr. Stephen)—who is no longer in his place—let the cat out of the bag in a telling intervention when he conceded that education standards in this country have slipped. That is a real condemnation of a Government who have been in power for so long.

Other figures demonstrate that failure also. In 1995, the National Institute of Economic and Social Research found that 64 per cent. of this country's work force have no vocational qualifications. The similar figures are 27 per cent. in Germany and 23 per cent in Switzerland. The institute found also that qualifications and education and training of the work force were a major determining factor in the companies' results. For example, in Germany about 90 per cent. of those who work on the shop floor in the woodworking industry have a relevant vocational qualification. In this country, the figure is only 10 per cent. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the output per person in that industry is 2.3 times higher in Germany than in this country. The skills and qualifications of the work force are critical to the productivity, and hence the economic success, of this country. I do not think that the hon. Member for Mid-Staffordshire (Mr. Fabricant) will dispute that point.

Mr. Fabricant: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that it is dangerous to make international comparisons of that sort, because he is comparing apples with pears? Vocational qualifications differ between countries. If the levels of vocational qualifications are higher in one country than in another, obviously fewer people will achieve those qualifications.

Mr. Foster: The hon. Gentleman might have an interesting and a valid point if he had listened to the figure that I gave earlier: 64 per cent. of the work force in this country have no vocational qualifications. We could argue about the value of certain vocational qualifications between nations: I accept that there are differences. However, we are seeking to establish the broad principle that high-quality vocational qualifications are critical to this country's productive output. We are lagging a long way behind other competitor nations.

Many hon. Members have referred to statistics regarding the stay-on rate and so on. It is important to recognise that the stay-on rate in this country has increased. The hon. Member for Eastbourne said that 72 per cent. of 16-year-olds now stay on at school. My figure is slightly higher at 75 per cent., but it matters not. That figure is higher still in other countries—particularly those of our European competitors. However, there is a worrying trend that hon. Members have not identified: those who choose to stay on in education at age 16 do not often remain for long. By the ages of 17 and 18, there is a rapid reduction in the number of people who remain in education compared with the position in other European countries.

Mr. MacShane: That is an important point. At the Rotherham college of arts and technology the enrolment rate is high, but so too is the drop-out rate. Up to 56 per cent. of students drop out of many courses after six months. I wonder whether the Government statistics for enrolments take into account the drop-out rate also.

Mr. Foster: The statistics show clearly that only 55 per cent. of 17-year-olds are in full-time education, compared with 87 per cent. in France and 93 per cent. in Germany. By age 18, the percentage has dropped still further. We could argue about the statistics, but I hope that all hon. Members will agree that there is real cause for concern.

The problem has been around for a long time. While looking at some old reports, I came across that of the royal commission on secondary education from 1895—101 years ago. I apologise for the sexist nature of the report's language, but it is appropriate to the time. The report states:

"The educational opportunities offered to boys and girls who do not proceed to universities, but leave school at 16, are still far behind the requirements of our time. The disadvantages from which young Englishmen suffer in industry and commerce owing to the superior preparation of their competitors in several countries of continental Europe are real."

The same point has been made today, 101 years later. We shall succeed only if there is a radical overhaul of the courses and qualification framework for those aged 16 to 19—or even for those aged 14 to 19. We shall end the damaging academic and vocational divide only if we acknowledge the need for increased investment in education and training.

Hon. Members have referred to Sir Ron Dearing's review. My party welcomes many of his recommendations. However, we have some reservations, as do all hon. Members. Perhaps our biggest reservation relates to A-levels, which were mentioned by the right hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden, among others. Perhaps because of the over-prescriptive remit of his review, Sir Ron Dearing has recommended retaining the title A-level. We are concerned that the title A-level, which the right hon. Lady referred to as a gold standard and the Minister described as the anchor point for academic courses, may inhibit the true parity of esteem between academic and vocational courses and qualifications. We are worried that the retention of that title and everything that it stands for may continue the practice whereby far too many young people embark on A-level courses that are inappropriate or too narrow for their requirements.

That said, we welcome Sir Ron's approach to the development of a qualifications framework based on different levels. Particularly with the new badging arrangements that he mentioned, it will enable the 16,000 or so qualifications that currently exist to be recognised and valued by society more quickly than, sadly, has been the case with GNVQs. The progress envisaged by Sir Ron Dearing may well be helped by a reduction in the number of qualifications available and the amalgamation of a number of the boards responsible for them. I very much welcome the Government's review on the potential amalgamation of the SCAA and NCVQ.

It is crucial that the proposed framework can form the basis for building on the work that has already been done on course modularisation and the development of credit accumulation and transfer. That would allow people to build up credits towards various qualifications in a way that focuses on their successes rather than their failures. It would also enable them to enter and leave the system at various times. The hon. Member for Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe) said that people need to be able to enter and leave the system of education and training in accordance with their specific needs and perhaps those of their employers. That is why a modular, credit-based system with a clear framework will be so important.

Mention has already been made—perhaps too briefly by some other hon. Members—of the importance of guidance. It is an incredibly complicated system and it is vital that we provide clear, easily available guidance to young people who are trying to find their way through it. That guidance must be disinterested; it must not be biased or unavailable from any of the providing organisations in education and training.

I should mention another issue on which I have slight qualms about Sir Ron Dearing's recommendations. Following my intervention in her speech, the right hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden appeared to agree with me. It concerns the key or core skills that Sir Ron Dearing said every young person must have. He stressed three: communication—including oracy—the application of numbers and information technology. Employers are telling me that they require three more—that all young people should have the skills of self-development, problem solving and working with others. If we are to prepare young people for the world of work, we should incorporate those additional skills in our long-term planning.

The Government have displayed a certain smug satisfaction about Sir Ron Dearing's proposals and a failure to remember that Sir Ron was brought in to make proposals to get us out of the present difficult mess that—to a large extent—is of the Government's own making. Surely no one could deny that we have a real problem with the range of youth training schemes—youth training, youth credits and modern apprenticeships. The youth training scheme has not been a success, with its wholly unacceptable completion rate of under 50 per cent.

The Government cannot simply blame others. The hon. Member for Shoreham wanted to blame the teachers and left-wing trendy LEAs. The present failure must be placed at the door of the Government, not least because of their simple failure to increase the funding of courses in line with inflation. Training providers are expected to do more with less money. It is hardly surprising that so many disaffected young people—pre and post-16—have dropped out of full-time education and desperately need to be persuaded that there is something else worth doing. Currently, that something else is simply not available.

The Government have withdrawn money from the training and enterprise councils—£200 million last year and a further £70 million this year. They have squeezed local education authorities so hard that many do not have sufficient funds to provide discretionary awards. The introduction of a market-driven system in further education has led to a dog-eat-dog approach which is setting colleges against each other. That, combined with the funding cuts, has put a large percentage of further education colleges into serious financial difficulties.

Let me briefly digress into a subject that is most important to the education of that age group. The morale of staff in further education colleges is very low. Not only do they have to work with larger groups of students and shortages of books and equipment in increasingly ramshackle buildings, but they have to cope with constantly changing demands, the new employment contracts that have been imposed and uncertainties about funding arrangements as battles rage between local education authorities where schools plan to reintroduce sixth forms and the Further Education Funding Council.

The large number of part-time lecturers in further education also have to cope with growing uncertainty in respect of employment protection rights due to the influx of agency agreements with organisations such as the Education Lecturers Service.

The Liberal Democrats have expressed our clear commitment to increase investment in education. We have said clearly that, if necessary, we would raise the level of income tax by 1p in the pound to pay for it. We have acknowledged that increased expenditure cannot pay for everything and that we have to be clear about where we plan to spend the money. We know that it cannot be spent more than once—I shall return to that in respect of the Labour party's proposals.

We have made it clear that some of the extra money—and we have described in detail how we would spend it—was spent on the education of 16 to 19-year-olds' ensuring

[Mr. Foster]

that, whether or not they were in work, a minimum of two days' a week education or training was made available to them. We recently announced our policies for the establishment of individual learning accounts, which would have money put into them by the state, employers—most important—and individual learners. We would encourage employers to make their contribution, although many already do, through a 2 per cent. remissible levy. We have stressed the importance of restoring benefit entitlement to 16 to 18-year-olds not in work, education or training, and of companies listing in their accounts the details of the money that they have spent on training. We have emphasised the importance of companies including in contracts of employment a commitment to training for their employees.

Those measures would boost training, encourage rather than deter young people of post-compulsory school age to continue their studies and overcome some of the problems created by the Government.

The Government's problems are not unique. We have seen in recent days that Labour has a number of problems of its own in respect of training. Many of us are extremely surprised at the way in which the Labour and Conservative parties increasingly seem to be coming together on issues such as compulsion. The Labour party seems to believe that people do not want to enter further education or training and will have to be compelled. There appears to be a growing belief among Labour Members of the need for benefit sanctions. We have seen a particular problem in relation to child benefit in recent days—

Mr. Greg Pope (Hyndburn): Cheap.

Mr. Foster: The hon. Gentleman says that my remarks are cheap, but it was rich of the Labour party to hold a press conference recently at which the smiling faces did not hide the chasm between Labour Members on child benefit. [HON. MEMBERS: "You should go and join them."] Labour Members say that I should join the Conservatives. I am making the point that the thinking of the Labour and Conservative parties is so similar on some issues that only the Liberal Democrats have distinctive, different policies and a real commitment to explaining how the money for them will be found.

Labour's proposals will be funded by, for example, the removal of child benefit—which as my noble Friend Lord Russell said in the other place the other day, is like robbing Peter to educate Paul. Two thirds of the cost of Labour's proposals for Target 2000 would be funded by a windfall tax. We all know that a windfall tax comes only once, and when it has been spent it will not be there for further years. We know what Labour would do in year one, but when the hon. Member for Wallsend (Mr. Byers) winds up, I hope that he will say what his Government would do in year two. It will also be interesting to hear from him how Labour will deliver Target 2000. Normally, politicians make all sorts of promises but fail to say from where the money will come. In this case, Labour has stated neither its intentions nor the source of the funding—just that it will set a target.

The hon. Member for Wallsend will forgive me for reminding him that in a television programme on which he and I appeared yesterday, he was asked whether Target 2000 would be delivered by further education colleges or TECs but was unable to answer.

Mr. Stephen Byers (Wallsend): For the sake of accuracy, my reply was that we want a diversity of providers, which could include further education colleges, training and enterprise councils, the private sector or employers in the workplace. We will not be prescriptive. We want quality provision, from wherever it might come.

Mr. Foster: I am sure that the House is grateful for that detailed clarification.

If this country is to succeed in the increasingly global market, it is vital that improvements are made and that all young people are given the high-quality education and training to which my party is committed. The Government have rightly accepted many of Sir Ron Dearing's recommendations, which we hope will make some improvements, and the Labour party is beginning to develop some policies—although it has not explained the details or funding methodology. My party does have a clear set of policies, and we have said how much they will cost and from where the money will come. That is the sort of honesty for which the people of this country are looking. We will wait for the other parties to develop their policies, then tell the country what they are and how much they will cost.

12.15 pm

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Mid–Kent): I declare an interest as a trustee of Community Service Volunteers, which is a major provider of training for youngsters with special needs in particular. As my hon. Friend the Minister has probably been briefed, I have on behalf of CSV been locked in a battle with his Department for six or seven months because of the inadvertent damage done by the Government to voluntary sector providers. My hon. Friend will be relieved to know that I intend to glance at that subject only tangentially today.

We are talking about boys and girls, men and women—not just about figures and percentages. It is important to recognise that—as the hon. Member for Oldham, Central and Royton (Mr. Davies) said—an increasing number of 16 to 18-year-olds are damaged people. The number of pre-16 exclusions is growing at a worrying rate. If one is sufficiently damaged, one cannot learn anything. Twenty per cent. of 16-year-olds do not achieve even level G, which is the average of an 11 or 12-year-old, in their English or mathematics GCSEs—which means that something like 200,000 youngsters are excluded from hope.

That is a form of robbery. The proposition that people should be forced by law to spend five days a week for about eight months a year for 11 years of their lives under compulsion and emerge with absolutely nothing is a scandal. It is no use viewing that in isolation. The tax system, for example, should be rethought to encourage household stability. Primary schools should teach reading, writing and numeracy linked to information technology.

One of the most scandalous features of the education system has been the extraordinary resistance for a long time by the educational establishment to the

Government's long-overdue reform of making schools publish their examination results. Now that that is done, we have a powerful instrument to single out schools that appear not to deliver the goods. It is reasonable to ask them the reason. It may be that a school's intake is of such difficulty that it requires additional resources to meet its obligations, but it is not right that a school should be allowed to get away with poor results. I welcome the Government's tightening up of the inspection system, but I urge my hon. Friend the Minister not to fall victim to something that has done more damage to this country's education system over the past 40 years than anything else—taking the fashion in teaching at the time and forcing it on every teacher and school.

As anyone who has ever taught knows, the fact is that different teachers teach in different ways and get results by differences of personality and technique. Some will teach by talking and talking, and do it very well and with great success. Others will teach in small groups and do it very well and with great success. It should be for teachers as professionals to choose how they deliver results. It should be for the Government to demand that those results are delivered.

I sometimes wonder what schools ask of teachers at their annual appraisals, because there are far too many teachers who started on a weak wicket, have been allowed to deteriorate and are now delivering a standard of teaching that demoralises them. They know that they are not enjoying it or doing it well, and that they need to be recovered.

It is also important to remember that self-respect for young people is essential. If a significant number of young people cannot earn that self-respect through work—as is likely to be the case for a considerable time still to come, however well the economy performs—they should be able to earn it through service to others. I have urged that for years, and I am disappointed—actually, I am ambivalent—to read that the Labour party will bring in a form of community service, and that it will be benefit-plus. As I understand the proposition, instead of saying to young people, "If you do voluntary work, you put your benefits at risk," it will state—as I have urged for many years—"You should get a slight enhancement of any benefit to which you are entitled while you are doing worthwhile approved voluntary work, because of what it does for you." I am sorry that I have failed all these years to persuade my party to make a commitment like that. If the Labour party has stolen clothes that we have refused to pick up off the bank, I can say only that I am also sorry about that.

Many young people in the 16 to 19-year-old age group have come from the type of household and home that has given them absolutely no model of how to create a stable household of their own. It is tremendously important for us to prepare young people for marriage, for setting up a household and for household responsibilities. There is huge scope for making use of concerned adults as voluntary mentors. We should try to do that.

I also believe—this is the only point at which I revert to my long battle with the Department—that the Government should value established teams, which have a fine record of results in working with people who present particular difficulties, and that everything should be done to improve their position. The current position, which I agree has happened inadvertently, is that they have been put at huge financial risk by the way in which changes in training for hard-to-train youngsters have worked out in practice.

I very much admire, respect and welcome the fact that the Government have begun to eliminate a number of the old boundaries. Nothing could be more expressive of that than the combination of the old Department of Employment with the Department of Education and Science. There have for far too long been artificial barriers between the academic and the vocational routes into training and into employment.

The development of the national vocational qualification has been an enormous success. I take issue with my right hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame A. Rumbold) in one respect. I believe that employers are quite rapidly beginning to recognise its value, and they are not nearly as confused as she suggested. It is very interesting that 90 per cent. of employers are prepared to employ on the basis of an NVQ gained in a different workplace. That says a great deal for NVQs. although I should tell her that they are still much too complex and that the assessment, which was quite properly done with tremendous care so that it would be credible against other academic routes, has gone over the top.

We should not pull up everything by the roots again. Many young people have good stories to tell about youth training, for example. We should go for incremental change. I believe that the Labour party's proposition of calling everything by new names and starting it all again from scratch—the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) suggested the same thing—is a mistake. We have spent far too many years pulling things up by the roots, giving them different names and confusing young people, employers and teachers. For goodness' sake, let us try to get them to grow incrementally.

We should also be careful not to let the school agenda dominate. What are the real-life goals of many of the youngsters who re-sit GCSEs and expect to get a very low grade, if they succeed in getting any grade? Many of them would be very much better occupied out there in the workplace. I believe that we undervalue the self-confidence, the communication skills and the other enhancements that 16-year-olds get from their Saturday job in Tesco. Those are important, too.

As the debate has shown, the need for action is urgent. By 2001, only 11 per cent. of jobs are likely to be unskilled or semi-skilled. Some 4 per cent. of graduates are unemployed, whereas 16 per cent. of the unskilled are unemployed. Self-employment has almost doubled since 1979, and part-time employment has increased by almost 75 per cent. I am delighted that the Under–Secretary of State for Social Security, my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Mr. Mitchell), is on the Front Bench, not only because I know that he is interested and committed to this issue but because it is terribly important that the Department of Social Security takes part in this debate.

I give my hon. Friend the Minister one suggestion. It is high time to alter the pension rules. It is absurd that it is so difficult for older workers to cut back gradually. A great many people in their 50s would very much like to be able to work three days a week and to have a job share or something similar but cannot do so because, if they did, they would put their pensions at risk.

Another absurdity is that it is not possible for people who are working part time—for whatever reason, whether at an early stage because they have children, or at a later

[Mr. Andrew Rowe]

stage because they want to work less hard—and who have the means to pay to make up the contributions to receive a full old-age pension. That is nonsense, because more avenues of employment for young people would be opened if older people were allowed to let decline the amount of time they work rather than having to cut themselves off altogether or continuing to work when they are weary.

We ought to recognise that virtually all employment is equally valid. There is a tendency when talking about policy to say that health care is a burden, yet health and its allied occupations are one of the fastest-growing employment areas. That sort of work also appeals to many young people—

Mr. MacShane: Especially from Australia.

Mr. Rowe: Yes, it also appeals to young people in Australia. Garages which maintain vehicles are not regarded as a burden on the state, yet the health service, which is engaged in maintaining human beings and returning them to work, is regarded rather differently.

One of the Minister's colleagues said recently in Edinburgh that it is vital to use the new technologies for those currently excluded by the system. There is a danger of using them only to enhance the prospects of those who are already secure in their training or employment. We need to ensure that the enormous opportunities for self-improvement that the new technologies offer are used by young people who are not especially successful.

The Government should be proud of the fact that the TECs are at last beginning to bed down. At Kent TEC, 3,880 young people achieved NVQs last year. Kent's target for modern apprenticeships is 1,936 starts this year, and we also have the first transnational youth work qualification, which is being set up with the assistance of the European Union.

The Labour party has produced a document containing some excellent ideas. It is, for instance, right that there should be no penalty for voluntary work or for part-time study. One of the absurdities of the present system is that people who do more than 16 hours of study a week put their benefits at risk. That is a mistake.

A lot of Labour's rhetoric, however, is pretty empty. At a press conference, the leader of the Labour party said:

"We will show how we can provide jobs for the 265,000 people aged 18 to 25 who have been unemployed for more than six months."

Well, show us. Then there are Labour's destructive proposals for a windfall tax on the utilities, proposed by the shadow Chancellor. Such a tax will affect either the amount of money that the utilities invest—an amount that the Labour party continually says is not enough—or investor confidence, with consequent effects for the price of shares and for the ability of the utilities to operate effectively. It will also affect jobs—the very jobs which the Labour party claims it is raiding the utilities to provide.

I want to end with a word about child benefit. Anyone who wants to trace the evolution of new Labour from old Labour could not find a more satisfactory route than the one offered by child benefit. The hon. Member for Motherwell, North (Dr. Reid), a Labour Front-Bench spokesman, has said:

"the one universal, most effective and most important instrument for the alleviation of child poverty"

is child benefit. He continued:

"Labour will restore the cuts in child benefit because that is right, just and long overdue."—[*Official Report*, 6 June 1990; Vol. 173, c. 726.]

Next, that stalwart of the shadow Cabinet, the hon. Member for Oldham, West (Mr. Meacher), said:

"By letting child benefit wither on the vine, is it not manifest that the Government still have no family policy worth the name? Uprating child benefit for all children . . . is the litmus test of commitment to the family".—[*Official Report*, 24 October 1990; Vol. 178, c. 354.]

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Ms Short), another Labour Front-Bench spokesperson—for how long we are not sure—said:

"The erosion of child benefit traps"

people on low incomes

"into poverty. It also deprives women of income. Giving the money to mothers ensures that it is spent on children."—[*Official Report*, 3 April 1990; Vol. 170, c. 1138.]

Mr. MacShane: The hon. Gentleman must understand that the idea that has been launched is not to remove child benefit per se, but to take a look at child benefit for 16 to 18-year-olds in order to target that part of welfare more directly. I believe that the hon. Gentleman shares my concern about the lost generation. If we want to help those people, we shall have to find the money somewhere—and giving child benefit to the mothers of children who go to the hon. Gentleman's old school is perhaps not the best way of arranging matters.

Mr. Rowe: I am deeply grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is a paragon of new Labour. The media, and sometimes even a few doubting Thomases on the Conservative Benches, occasionally question the extent to which new Labour differs from old Labour. I should have thought that the Labour party would welcome the clear demonstration of the yawning gulf between old and new Labour characterised by the quotations that I have just offered the House.

The subject of 16 to 19-year-olds is one of the most important that faces our nation. It involves the whole question of how we create a society in which, under all the pressures of modern life and the fragmentation of households, young people can enter school and enter training sufficiently self-confident in themselves to be able to take full advantage of those opportunities.

I shall end with a plug for what we shall do next Wednesday, when some 800 people will go to Coventry cathedral for a day of discussion, with the assistance of young people themselves, about the kind of world in which they are growing up and in which they want to grow up. I hope that that occasion will send a message to the nation. If we do not look after our young, we are looking after nothing.

12.35 pm

Mr. Brian Jenkins (South–East Staffordshire): First, I wish to inform the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) that working with others and decision making are core skills that are included in GNVQs. We may need a little more publicity to let employers know what is included in GNVQs.

The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Smith) mentioned average European youth unemployment. Did he mean the arithmetic mean, the median or the mode? If he told us which he meant, he would clarify his point. Most people tend to mean the arithmetic mean by the average, but the median is a more honest approach to averages. Let us not confuse one another, because another part of the core skills is numeracy.

Mr. Tim Smith: I was quoting from Government statistics—well, the source is Eurostat, so I am not sure that they are Government statistics—and they are based on the International Labour Organisation measure of unemployment. It gives the figures as Spain, 38.2 per cent.; Italy 36.5 per cent.; France 27.7 per cent.; and the United Kingdom, 15.7 per cent. As I said, the average is 20.8 per cent., and that shows how good the United Kingdom's record is.

Mr. Jenkins: But which average is that? The arithmetic mean distorts the average, and people should use the median. What is the median figure and how does the UK compare with that? If the median is not in the statistics, it should be there in future.

One of the reasons why I attended the debate today is a letter from a group of my constituents—small business men—called the M42 Breakfast Business Club. They wrote to me because they have discussed a document issued by the Government office for the west midlands, and they wished to comment on it. The document shows that the west midlands today falls below the national average for manufacturing output. That area used to be called the workshop of Britain. When the Government came to office, that area was the manufacturing heartland, but it is now below the average.

The business club brought to my attention the widespread skill shortage and the related shortfall in education and training opportunities. Those small business men point out that they want to try to increase inward investment. Surprisingly, the west midlands has a strong tourism industry, but as a potential site for inward commercial investment it is very poor. My constituents are most concerned about the shortage of skills and disappointing educational achievements of young people. Several members of the business club give examples of experiences in their companies when they have not been able to find appropriately skilled personnel. They find that youngsters have low levels of basic education and expectancy problems. The business men are worried that if there is no improvement in the situation, the skills level of their manpower will continue to fall.

A few weeks ago, I had a discussion with the Further Education Funding Council. The FEFC's view of Britain and our work force is that we face a future of short-term, casual employment in which individuals invest in their own human capital and improve their own skills base. Anyone worth his salt will know that in business it is unacceptable to take an order and promise to deliver, only to find that the work force is too small to enable the production to take place. Unfortunately, that often happens these days. The future for our industry lies in a highly skilled and efficient work force. Against that background, it is possible to take orders and deliver. That is what we should be working towards.

Many companies in my constituency are extremely small. They represent, however, the sector from which growth will come. They are so small that they cannot assemble a training programme for themselves. They look to the local college to put on such a programme. They will be prepared to take someone on and send him to the college one day a week to improve his skills level.

British industry has relied for so long upon "sitting next to Nelly" as a training initiative. That is fine as long as Nelly knows the job. Unfortunately, over the past 20 years we have seen the demise of our skills base. Employees have been leaving industry, including members of our skilled work force. The youngsters who are going into industry can no longer learn from their peers. Lack of skill is placing our industrial base in a crisis. The Government still seem not to understand what is happening.

Schoolteachers are dedicated to their profession and should be applauded. Anyone who reads the report of my speech should thank his or her teacher for that ability to read. I do not know of a harder-working or more skilled group than our teachers. I would not do their job, even for a Member's pay. Most teachers earn nothing like that which we are paid.

We know that many youngsters are staying on at school. Far more are doing so than 20 years ago, for example. But 20 years ago, they had the opportunity to get a job. Unfortunately, jobs are no longer available for them. As a result, more youngsters are staying on. They believe that in so doing, they will enhance their opportunities in future to find employment.

We have been told that 72 per cent. of youngsters are staying on at school, but we have not been told about the social class factor. The lower a family's income level, the greater the pressure on youngsters to leave school to find a job. I remember one of the students whom I taught a few years ago. She is just about to complete her course. She prepared a CV for a university, but did not submit it. I discovered that since 15 years of age, she had been getting up at 5 o'clock in the morning and spending two hours cleaning the local supermarket before getting ready for school. I asked her why she had not submitted her CV. She told me that she felt ashamed because she had had to do early-morning cleaning work. I concluded immediately that anyone who knew what she had been doing would invite her for an interview. Such dedication can only be applauded. There are so many young people with that dedication.

I know of students who have had to leave courses, especially A-level courses, because they had no grant. They moved to a youth training scheme because that brought money into the family. Income is a vital ingredient for young people who continue on a 16-to-19 education programme.

I have never worked in a school, but I worked for many years in further education colleges. I have recent experience. The FE work force is probably more demoralised and demotivated now than ever before. That is partly because of incorporation, marketing, structuring and replacing A-level courses with general national vocational qualifications. It is also because colleges have become businesses. To get money in, they have to get people in, so in many colleges, no matter who walks through the door, the answer is, "Yes, we have a course for you," whether the course is appropriate or not. People are maintained on the course as long as possible, because the college is paid for delivery of the course. It then

[Mr. Jenkins]

receives 15 per cent. of the money for the outcome. So if the student gains a qualification at the end of the course, the college is paid again.

Mr. Rowe: The hon. Gentleman is on to an important point. It is a point that one hears frequently. I would regard an FE college as poorly managed if what the hon. Gentleman describes were the grounds on which it recruited people.

The hon. Gentleman talks about short-termism. If that is the way in which colleges recruit people, they will have a huge turnover of students who are not motivated to pursue their particular course, because they were put on it inappropriately. In the end, the reputation of such colleges will nosedive. But FE colleges that are trying desperately hard to drive up their standards will be in the business a great deal longer than the rest.

Mr. Jenkins: Yes, the college that drives up its standards will be in business when the rest have gone to the wall. The trouble is that it is very much short-termism. The college's money comes in in September and it has to meet its bills month on month.

If we are to look at facts and figures, we should consider the fall-out rate. About 50 per cent. of students do not complete the course in the first year. That is the truth. We should consider what qualifications are gained. Colleges are paid for every qualification. NVQ level 1 WB—warm and breathing—is well known. No doubt we could put some hon. Members down for it. Students gain that qualification because it is at such a low level, and if a college puts a certain number of students in for it, there is no difficulty.

If hon. Members go to British universities and ask about the quality of their intake, they will get a surprise. It is estimated that 25 per cent. of students in British universities today are not capable of undertaking the course on which they enrolled. They do not have the basic skills or qualifications. In many universities, the first term is spent pushing the students up to the starting level, but the universities must take the students, because without them they will not receive money. The system is money-driven. That is the problem. Unless we take the market-centred, money-driven aspect out of education for 16 to 19-year-olds, it will be doomed to failure. We must ensure quality provision in education and training. We must make it obligatory that employers send their youngsters to colleges or to take up training places in institutions that are recognised as providers of a quality, distinctive qualification.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with Sir Ron Dearing that the A-level must be the gold standard? If the efficacy of the A-level is reduced, we shall reduce still further the standard of education of our youngsters when they enter university. Will he resist the blandishments of some of his hon. Friends who believe that the curriculum should be broadened, thereby reducing the standard of A-levels?

Mr. Jenkins: If the hon. Gentleman believes that there is a dividing line between academic and vocational studies that cannot be crossed, he does not understand about subjects such as physics, science or computing. They are academic disciplines that are vocationally oriented. There is an intermix. As the hon. Gentleman rightly says, it is not the breadth but the standard that we should worry about. So long as that standard is maintained across the disciplines, it does not matter whether the subject is vocational or academic. That is the problem that we have got ourselves into.

Sir Ron Dearing is right to say that there should be a well-known, widely accepted standard, but we should make sure that all our youngsters have the opportunity to reach that standard. Some young people do not do well with the academic-style A-level approach. They are much better with a hands-on, more vocational approach, which is more understandable to them and within which they can reach the same standard. Computing, science and physics are perfect examples. So long as we look constantly to improve the quality and inspectors are there to monitor it, we shall do well.

We must give young people the opportunity to study to A-level standard because, make no mistake about it, many of them must consider work in order to bring income into the family. We must put a procedure and system in place to allow youngsters to maximise their ability. That is what it is about. Without that, we shall suffer in the next century. We can achieve that, but it needs a bit more will. I am not sure that the Government have the will to implement that programme in Britain today.

12.49 pm

Mr. Tim Smith (Beaconsfield): If Labour Members, whether on the Front Bench or the Back Bench, are serious about forming a Government in the foreseeable future, they will have to do much better than they have today. I should like to refer to just two quotations from *Hansard*. The first comes from the hon. Member for Oldham, West (Mr. Meacher), who said during a debate on child benefit:

"It was a Labour Government who brought in child benefit and, for the reasons that I have just given, we believe strongly that it is a key benefit, central to our social security system, which should be built up and not cut back."

Secondly, the hon. Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown) said in the same debate:

"Child benefit is a right."—[*Official Report*, 27 June 1985; Vol. 81, c. 1098-120.]

Then we were told on 19 April by the hon. Member for Dunfermline, East that, if he has his way, child benefit for 16 and 17-year-olds is to be abolished. I understood that that was a firm Labour policy, although that was queried by the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), who suggested that there was some doubt about it. The first thing that we should be told, therefore, is whether it is a firm Labour commitment.

Let there be no misunderstanding about the consequences. For families who have a 16 or 17-year-old in full-time education, it would mean the loss of £520 per year or would be equivalent to an increase in their marginal rate of income tax of no less than 5p in the pound.

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman said that child benefit was available as a right. How many mothers of 16, 17 and 18-year-old children do not receive child benefit?

Mr. Smith: I did not say that child benefit was a right. I was quoting the hon. Member for Dunfermline, East—

he said that child benefit was a right, and now he is telling us that it is not a right for the parents of children who are in full-time education.

The hon. Member for Wallsend (Mr. Byers) asks about children who are not in full-time education. Their parents are not entitled to child benefit at present. There is a good reason for that. It is that, as a matter of public policy, we wish to encourage parents to allow their children to stay on at school beyond the age of 16. That is why that arrangement is in place. There can be no doubt that, if child benefit were withdrawn in the way that the hon. Member for Dunfermline, East apparently wants, that would be a major disincentive to every family involved.

Mr. Byers: For the record, child benefit is available as a right only to mothers with children up to the age of 16. Our review does not touch that at all. There are 846,000 mothers with children aged 16, 17 or 18 who, under this Government, do not receive child benefit.

Mr. Smith: Child benefit is a right for parents who have children in full-time education. It is those parents to whom the hon. Member for Dunfermline, East was addressing himself on Friday 19 April. He is proposing that child benefit be removed from those parents at a cost of £520 per year. When we ask what is to be put in its place, we are told that the matter is to be the subject of a review. That simply is not good enough. People have been told that the benefit will be removed and they have not been told what, if anything, will be put in its place. That will give all the wrong messages to those people. If the policy is introduced, it will be a major disincentive.

Mr. MacShane: If the hon. Gentleman is saying that child benefit is a right for all parents of children in full-time education, is he arguing that it should continue after the age of 18? What is being discussed here is simply the age at which it stops.

Mr. Smith: I most certainly am not. The hon. Member for Dunfermline, East said that child benefit is "a right". For that group of parents, the benefit is a present entitlement. Those are my words, but the word "right" was used by the hon. Gentleman. Now he says that he wishes to abolish the benefit.

Instead of introducing red herrings, the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) would be better advised to answer my question, because people outside want to know Labour's policy, and there is a gap, a gulf. We are told that there will be a review, but that is not good enough: we must be told what is to be done for parents in these circumstances. As I said in an intervention, if Labour's proposal on that is combined with its plan to introduce a national minimum wage, which would obviously apply to 16 and 17-year-olds in work in the same way as it would to everybody else—

Mr. MacShane: Why?

Mr. Smith: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that the national minimum wage would not apply to those people? If that is the case, we should be told. I understood that it was to be universal. Is this another change in Labour policy?

I think that I am entitled to make the assumption that the national minimum wage would apply to 16 and 17-year-olds, and that would seriously shift the balance of advantage against staying on at school and in favour of going out to work. But we want to achieve precisely the opposite. The same is true of Labour's proposal for a windfall tax which, it is suggested, would be used to finance all the improvements that it announced earlier this week at a press conference.

We have not been told much about that windfall tax, but we should be. For example, we have not been told what is meant by "excess profits". Let us take one company as an example. The Director General of Gas Supply announced some tough recommendations this week in respect of TransCo, a subsidiary of British Gas. The company says that if it has to implement those proposals, it will have to make 10,000 people redundant. If a future Labour Government introduced a windfall tax on top of tough regulations for all such companies, and not just British Gas, it is inconceivable that there would not be significant extra job losses.

The public should understand that those are the consequences of Labour's proposals to raise a significant sum. I think that it is £1,500 million, and that is a huge amount of extra corporation tax to be spread over two or three years. As the hon. Member for Bath said, it is a dishonest policy, because a scheme that would have to be funded continuously into the future would be financed by what is essentially a one-off tax. People should understand that when that windfall tax expired, there would be a continuing commitment and no explanation of how it would be funded. Both those aspects of the debate are important, and people deserve answers. I hope that when the hon. Member for Wallsend replies to the debate, we shall get them.

This subject has been debated in the House over many years, and the hon. Member for Bath referred to the 1895 royal commission on secondary education. It seems that some of the recommendations made at that time are still relevant today, but the debate goes back further than that: we could trace it back to the middle of the 19th century and the end of the industrial revolution. I made my maiden speech on this subject under a Labour Government in 1977 and, of course, the problem will not be resolved overnight. My right hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame A. Rumbold) was right to point to some of the cultural problems.

We tend to view this issue as a top-down problem. We should also look at it from a bottom-up point of view. We should look at it through the eyes of the people of this country, especially young people, and try to raise their expectations.

Let us compare attitudes to education in this country with those in the far east. Someone told me earlier this week that there are people in the newly industrialised countries of Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore who are prepared to sell their houses to invest in their children's education. The savings ratio in some of those countries is 40 per cent. They understand the importance of education.

We must ensure that people in this country get the message that there is no alternative to improved education and training if we are to compete effectively with those countries and if the individuals concerned are to play a full part in the job market. The Dearing proposals will improve the lot of those people; I support them, and I support the Government's policy in trying to improve the lot of all young people in training and education.

12.59 pm

Mrs. Bridget Prentice (Lewisham, East): The Government obviously decided to call this debate in a lame attempt to score points on child benefit, but they scored an own goal. In France—a country not dissimilar in size to ours—four young people stay on in education for every one who does so here. The Government have no right to lecture anyone on education and training opportunities.

I do not want to indulge in petty political point scoring, easy and amusing though it would be. I want to talk, as my hon. Friends have consistently done, about education and training.

Anyone with an ounce of sense recognises how crucial it is to refocus the political agenda on the needs of 16 to 19-year-olds. We have not only a responsibility to do so, but a duty. It is in everyone's interests, and in the interests of our economy to do so.

We need to ensure that young people are fully equipped with the skills and knowledge that they need for the future. As my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill) said, Britain has fewer 16 to 18-year-olds in full-time education than any other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development country apart from Turkey. According to a Lloyds bank report published in March 1996, half of UK manufacturing industry, and 40 per cent. of firms, believe that they are suffering from serious skills shortages, and that better skills training is crucial to our country's economic success. Where is it?

Young people in my constituency have vividly expressed to me the low regard in which they hold training. Their view is hardly surprising, given the Government's failure to come up with a high-profile, high-quality training scheme for young people.

Training is seen as a last resort instead of a valuable, worthwhile option for the future. That assertion is, unfortunately, borne out by the facts. The number of young people who left school after year 11 and took network training places dropped significantly from the appallingly low figure of 6.28 per cent. in 1994 to the disgraceful figure of 2.7 per cent. in 1995.

The Tories' youth training programme has failed to equip young people with the skills that they need. Less than half—46 per cent.—of those who start youth training complete it. Despite such results, youth training costs more than £500 million a year. Even more scandalous is the fact that youth training does not require development of skills in the core areas of communication, numeracy and information technology. It is hardly surprising that training is not regarded as a positive option and is not the first choice of many school leavers.

By contrast, Labour intends to bring about a skills revolution that will target young people and which is relevant to them. They must be equipped with basic skills that they can use and build on throughout life. To raise the profile of skill training, we must improve quality standards significantly.

Let us consider what is happening after the Tories' pathetic record of 17 years of inaction. The figures for destinations—what happens after a person has been through one of the Government's failed attempts at training—show a depressing inadequacy in the quality of the training and the data available. What have our young people done to deserve a Government like this, who ignore their needs and aspirations, their talents and abilities?

In Birmingham, one in three leave youth training for unemployment. What sort of message does that send to our youth? Does it convince them that they have a stake in society? In central London—which my hon. Friends the Members for Streatham and for Dulwich (Ms Jowell) now have to deal with after the shocking demise of the South Thames TEC, in respect of which the Government washed their hands of any responsibility—a staggering 29 per cent. of young people end up on the dole. In my area, which has been clamped on to SOLOTEC, one in four young people end up on the dole. What will happen to their aspirations? Is it any wonder that our youth are alienated from society and their communities?

Even those outcomes are skewed, because they include the 7 per cent. of leavers who end up on another Government training programme. Those youths did not leave training, but were simply recycled. If those figures are taken out, the overall unemployment rate after training across the country is one in four, which is a disgrace. In fact, it is more than a disgrace—it is shameful—and no Government with that record can hold up their head and say that they have done anything for young people.

Early leaving is a particularly worrying and appalling indictment of schemes when the options for young people are so few. Lewisham is not a well-off borough and includes large areas of poverty and deprivation. Under this Government, our youngsters are expected to sink further and further into the mire, but young people are not stupid: they recognise Mickey Mouse schemes when they see them, which is why they vote with their feet. That so many young people leave, despite the absence of an alternative source of income, is a sad and pathetic reflection on the quality of their training.

There is something seriously wrong with the quality of training on offer to young people and with the programme to provide training leading to qualifications. The only people to blame are those on the Government Benches who have turned a blind eye to the prospects and hopes of our young people. To obtain an income, young people are being compelled to enter schemes but, having completed them, only half obtain jobs. Half will achieve qualifications, and one quarter will be unemployed. If Conservative Members had a conscience, they would be thoroughly ashamed.

I want to explain what could happen and to show how, under a Labour Government, the best would be available for all. I look forward to the day when young people actively seek skills training in the knowledge that they will be taught useful skills that will improve their career prospects throughout their life and that there will be continuing opportunities to update and develop their skills. High-quality training and education are not enough. For young people to open their eyes to the opportunities that will be open to them once they have completed their training, there must be a comprehensive, impartial, high-quality careers service. The Dearing report recognised that when it stated:

"Central to maximising achievement and reducing wastage is the provision of expert independent careers education and guidance to young people on their choice of pathways and roles".

The careers service should be seen as the enabler that helps people to make good decisions about their future. The most basic stake that a young person can have in

society is a job. Unequal access to opportunity leads to social division, hinders individual development and squanders talent. The Labour party views an efficient careers service as the essential tool to promote equality of opportunity and to enable individuals, particularly young people, to maximise their potential.

Despite numerous assertions from all quarters that careers advice is essential for a flourishing economy and a fulfilled, effective work force, Britain's careers service remains the Cinderella service and its possibilities remain under-realised. In the long term, the benefits provided by proper careers advice will mean that the investment pays for itself. If the careers service was able to encourage only 10 per cent. of current drop-outs to attain higher-level qualifications, the monetary savings alone would amount to £35 million a year.

I utterly condemn the Government's implementation of a cut-price market-based system to run the careers service. Their tendering process has shown itself to have little to do with quality provision and everything to do with their obsession with asset-stripping local government.

Labour's Target 2000 programme will refocus and redefine the careers service to recognise its increasingly important role in helping people to maximise their potential. The personal development and guidance service will interview every young person aged between 14 and 18 once a year. That entitlement will ensure that talent is not squandered and that young people are set on the path to fulfilment. We must not let them escape through the net into a wilderness of despair.

I do not understand the Government's complacency. Labour Members are angry about what the Government have done to young people in education and training. We are angry that they have had the cheek to introduce the debate today, when they have done so little to serve our youngsters. I have taught many young people with talents, skills, aspirations and ability. I cannot bear to think that they, and others like them, have been let down so badly by this ignorant and uncaring Government.

Mr. Stephen: The hon. Lady has complained a great deal about the Government. When will she offer some constructive, costed proposals that the Labour party would introduce if it had the opportunity?

Mrs. Prentice: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman has just entered the Chamber and did not hear me explain our proposals to provide quality advice and guidance to young people. He can read about them in detail in *Hansard*.

This is a lost generation: lost to society and lost to the economy. We all lose when the skills and talents of our young people are not utilised, and our young people are lost to themselves because they have become disillusioned, demeaned and alienated. They are lost in the minds and the actions of the scurrilous Tory Government, who have done nothing for them. They are lost and forgotten. This disgraceful rump of a Government have launched a slogan saying that it hurt but it worked. It is still hurting our young people across Britain, but they are not working.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Morris): Before I call the hon. Member for Mid-Staffordshire (Mr. Fabricant), I remind hon. Members that, although they may speak with the assistance of notes, they should not read from their notes in the manner of a lecture. That general advice applies across the Chamber and this morning's debate has exemplified this problem.

1.11 pm

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Mid–Staffordshire): The contribution by the hon. Member for Lewisham, East (Mrs. Prentice) was singularly ill informed. I can only assume that it was written by her researcher at least six months ago, with reference to the Conservative party slogan added in the past few days. The hon. Lady's speech did not reflect the real situation.

In my brief contribution, I shall outline what the Government have done in providing education and training for 16 to 19-year-olds. I shall then offer some suggestions of my own and illustrate the appalling dichotomies that would occur within the Labour party if it ever attained office.

Despite what Labour Members have said, the youth training scheme is a success. It has trained more than 4.5 million people since 1983 and it is currently training more than 284,000 people. However, the test is not simply the number of people who are in youth training schemes, but the fact that some 72 per cent. of youth training scheme leavers go on to other work, education or training. That is the acid test. How can Labour Members claim that the youth training scheme is a failure when 72 per cent. of leavers go on to other activities? We should remember also that all young people under 18 who are not in full-time education or employment are guaranteed places on youth training schemes.

Career development loans are a success also, offering between £200 and £8,000 to cover 80 per cent. of fees for courses lasting more than two years. The Investors in People scheme has led to the burgeoning of training and enterprise councils. I congratulate the Staffordshire training and enterprise council. My hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) spoke at great length about the Sussex TEC. The job interview guarantee scheme, training for work and job clubs demonstrate that the Government are far from complacent about the training of 16 to 19-year-olds.

Let me now turn to some of the recommendations that have been made recently by Sir Ron Dearing and make some suggestions of my own. I welcome the fact that the Government invited Sir Ron to make his recommendations. However, that does not necessarily mean that I have to agree with them all.

Although it causes me concern and grave misgivings, sadly, for the very first time in my career, I agree with the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane). It was quite a shaking experience. In an intervention, he spoke about A-levels and suggested that perhaps they are not the gold standard. I suspect that I might be the only Conservative Member here today who will say it, but I do not believe either that A-levels are the gold standard. I agree with the chief economist of the *Financial Times* that the so-called gold standard has been an unmitigated disaster for Britain.

It is not a matter of comparing academic education with vocational education, but one of comparing depth with breadth. One of the great weaknesses that Britain has had to endure, and I use the word endure advisedly, is the fact that 15 and 16-year-olds who are academic are forced to

[Mr. Michael Fabricant]

make such an early decision as to the three, four—or in some cases two—subjects in which they wish to specialise.

It is all very well for us to say that we have introduced NVQs and GNVQs for vocational study, but some people who are academic would prefer a broad education. In England and Wales the stock answer is to say, "That is fair enough. Don't take A-levels and take more AS-levels." However, if an academic person chooses one of the more popular universities—particularly Oxbridge—or one of the more traditional universities such as Durham, those universities always give preference to people with A-levels rather than AS-levels.

On that one issue, Sir Ron Dearing has hedged his bets by saying that he wants to retain AS-levels and A-levels. In practice, for someone who is academically inclined, they are mutually exclusive. If one chooses AS-levels, that can preclude one from going to one of the better universities. The only way to get round that problem is to be bold and get rid of the so-called gold standard and adopt the Scottish system of Highers. Nobody denies that the system in Scotland is one of the finest in the world.

Like others who have spoken today, I was educated outside the United Kingdom as well as at British universities. Bachelors and masters degrees in Britain, where I have attended universities, are often very narrowly focused. When universities say that we need the depth of A-levels to provide the basis on which to continue a degree course, that is patent nonsense. The combination of different examination boards and the choice of modules means that, in pure maths alone, there are some 320 possible different syllabuses. I took my pure and applied maths A-levels under the Oxford board, and the London board syllabus was totally different. In any event, university education cannot begin where A-levels finished because there are so many different syllabuses.

The legacy of A-levels has resulted in this nation being good at research but not at development. Members in all parts of the House often say, for example, "We invented the hovercraft, but another country exploited it." The electronic calculator was invented not in Japan but here in the United Kingdom, and exploited abroad. Young academic people have a narrow education beyond the age of 15, which is wrong.

I predict that A-levels will not survive, whether there is a Conservative or Labour Government in future, because they are patently old fashioned. The only reason for conserving A-levels is to allow schools a period of stability during the change that, rightly, they have had to undergo. A-levels must change for the sake of this country's future.

Labour's proposal for a windfall tax is fallacious. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid–Kent (Mr. Rowe) said, it would affect profits and jobs. In extremis, a windfall tax is the most ludicrous of the shadow Chancellor's many ludicrous proposals. Any industry that knows that it will be subject to a one-off windfall tax will ensure that there are no profits from which the tax can be taken. The shadow Chancellor predicted first that a windfall tax would raise £3 billion, then lowered the figure to £1 billion, and now gives a figure of £300 million. If the hon. Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown) goes on talking about a windfall tax, he will raise nothing because industries will make sure that there are no profits for him to tax. If any of Labour's spending commitments are to be taken seriously, the party must address that issue.

Many schools, particularly in inner cities, have become failure factories. Earlier, I quoted an article by Stephan Shakespeare, in which he said that

"even the word 'reading' has been challenged"

by the politically correct, who lampooned it as "barking at text" and said that

"children who could merely read were like dogs who knew when to make a noise."

The article goes on to describe a recent visit to a London primary school—and my right hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame A. Rumbold) was right to say that one cannot debate education for 16 to 19-year-olds without discussing the foundation of primary school education. Stephan Shakespeare writes:

"I saw the teacher—unshaven, in T-shirt and trainers, with rings through his nose—squatting in the classroom while a boy was kicking a ball about in the corridor outside. 'He's been looking at a book about football,' he said to me with a smile—whether by way of excuse or the sharing of some new pedagogic technique, I'm not quite sure."

That is the political correctness that the Government inherited from the last Labour Government.

I believe that teachers want to be good teachers, and that they can best become good teachers if they have good headmasters. I also suggest that we introduce a staff college for head teachers. Let head teachers be proud and proclaim that learning the 10 times table or the 12 times table is no bad thing and that sitting there with a blackboard and chalk is not such a bad way in which to get across the foundations of reading, writing and arithmetic.

I further recommend that we find an objective testing measurement. That issue has been addressed by Sir Ron Dearing, who rightly pointed out that the so-called "gold standard" has become eroded, or even corroded—despite the fact that, as those of us who have taken science A-levels know, gold does not corrode. A-levels have become corroded because of the system of modular testing, and Sir Ron was right to deal with that fact.

As Friday mornings provide a good opportunity to raise philosophical points, I should like to say that the Government were right to increase the number of people entering further and higher education. As I pointed out in an earlier intervention, we inherited a situation from the previous Labour Government in which only one in eight students went on to further and higher education. One in three students now go into further and higher education.

I must, however, question whether further and higher education should exclusively take the form of a university education. I am not convinced that universities are the appropriate institution to attend for all people who seek a higher education. It is inevitable that standards of entry will be lowered if so many people are to go to university. More vocational courses in non-universities are also required.

What about the so-called "Labour Government in waiting"? What has been the Labour party's record on this issue? When the Government introduced the Education Act 1979, which was to save the remaining grammar

schools, what did the Labour party do? It opposed it. When the Government introduced the Education Act 1980, which brought in parental choice and provided information through testing, the Labour party voted against it. When the Government introduced the Education Reform Act 1988 and the national curriculum, the Labour party opposed those measures.

When the Government introduced the Education (Student Loans) Act 1990 and top-up loans for students, what did the Labour party do? It opposed those measures. When the Government introduced the Education (Schools) Act 1992—which made it easier for schools to become grant-maintained and brought in the Funding Agency for Schools for England—the Labour party opposed it. When the Government brought in the Education Act 1994, which reformed initial teacher training—the very issue that I was talking about, and about which Labour Members agreed with me—the Labour party opposed it.

Labour's tax on sixth form education will be a disincentive for our most gifted students to continue their education. Labour's continued adherence to trendy dogma and political correctness will prolong the learning deficit suffered by many of our nation's children, which is a legacy from previous Labour Governments. Labour's continued unwillingness to set out a price tag for any of its policies reduces the promises of its Front Benchers to empty rhetoric. Labour's continuing betrayal of our young—our nation's future—creates a legacy that this nation should never forget.

1.28 pm

Ms Tessa Jowell (Dulwich): No one could disagree with the words of the Secretary of State for Education and Employment addressing a Business in the Community conference last year:

"I want all young people to have every chance to make the right choices at 16 and beyond . . . The education and training system has a vital role in addressing achievement. It should have high expectations of all young people, regardless of social background or disadvantage. We know that this is not happening. We need to act. We must ensure that we get it right first time for everyone."

Those are fine words indeed, but they ring very hollow with the young people of my constituency, who have had a pretty raw deal from the Government this year and last. They have witnessed the collapse of two flagship Government policies in education and employment owing to sheer neglect and incompetence.

First came the collapse of the South Thames training and enterprise council. That TEC fell apart before the Government's very eyes. In Dulwich, it left local schools high and dry without their promised funds, and training providers were left thousands of pounds out of pocket because of unpaid contracts. Hundreds of young people were left in limbo, not knowing whether they were going to be able to continue their work placements. They were denied the stability and certainty that is essential to sustaining young people's commitment to training.

During this shambles I was contacted by many parents. I particularly remember the parents of some young girls who were a month away from completing work placements with a nursery in east Dulwich. They had been told that their daughters could not complete the course as the funding had dried up. To them, lame excuses about the complexity of the funding arrangements and the training and enterprise council were irrelevant; but they did know that the Government had not got it right first time and that they were the victims.

The scale of the disruption that followed the collapse of the South Thames TEC, and the disruption it caused to training providers in Dulwich, was incalculable. Perhaps the most distasteful aspect of all was the spectacle of a Government who claim to want to raise educational achievement for all but who washed their hands so quickly of responsibility for the whole affair.

Hard on the heels of the TEC debacle came the Government's bungled attempt to privatise the Southwark careers service, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, East (Mrs. Prentice) referred. The Secretary of State claims:

"our reforms of the careers service are designed to provide more effective guidance."

Few people in Southwark would agree.

Earlier this year, the Grand Metropolitan Trust emerged as the Government's preferred bidder in the race to take over the running of the service; it was only when Grand Met read the small print of the contract and found out exactly what service it was expected to provide that it got cold feet and withdrew pretty quickly. The result has been months of uncertainty and a further erosion of local young people's confidence.

I entirely share the sentiments of the Secretary of State and Ministers that we must offer young people the chance to raise their achievements and skills. I wholeheartedly agree with the Secretary of State, who told the Business in the Community conference that there is a need to identify the parts of the country that need extra support. She has failed to act on those words, however.

Let us examine the position of school leavers in Southwark in recent years. Last year, less than 7 per cent. of the 2,000 year 11 students in Southwark went on to sixth forms; just under half went on to study in FE colleges. The grand total of students continuing their education was just under 60 per cent.—the jointly held lowest percentage of any London borough. Southwark has now been at the bottom of the London league of 16 to 19-year-olds who continue their education for some years, but rather than deal with the problems, Government policies conspire to make them worse.

The worst aspect of all is that the Government appear to enjoy pillorying inner London boroughs for their efforts to improve standards of education.

When the Minister opened the debate, he referred to the Ofsted assessment of the performance of inner London primary schools, and Southwark was one of the local authorities studied. The right hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame A. Rumbold) underlined the link—and I entirely agree with her—between the level of achievement that children reach in primary school and their achievement later on as 16 to 19-year-olds. I wish to give the House a flavour of the unedited Ofsted report which, once it got to Ofsted's offices, appears to have been doctored for political purposes and not in the interests of raising education standards in Southwark, Islington or Tower Hamlets.

Some of the passages that were deleted from the Ofsted report—I leave the House to judge why they were deleted—were:

"Most of these characteristics—bilingualism, poverty, pupil and staff turnover—were outside the control of the schools and where schools faced a combination of them their task was a difficult one."

[Ms Tessa Jowell]

Another passage reads:

"Weaknesses do not occur because the teachers are less well qualified or more inept than their colleagues elsewhere . . . teaching reading in many of these schools is a particularly difficult task for which the teachers are not always well prepared."

The final passage that was deleted reads:

"The quality of teaching of reading was satisfactory or better in approximately two-thirds of the lessons observed in Year 2."

It was changed to read:

"In one third of these the quality of teaching was unsatisfactory or poor."

Neither I nor my hon. Friend the Member for Peckham (Ms Harman), nor anyone who sits as a member of the majority group on Southwark council, would for one moment defend the poor attainment of many of the children in Southwark schools. Southwark co-operated with Ofsted and welcomed it into the schools. The borough co-operated because it is united in an absolute determination to improve the standards that everybody agrees—for reasons which are clearly evident—are unacceptable. We are not prepared to say that because children come from homes in which English is a second language, or because they come from poor homes or because they live with only one parent, they are not capable of learning and doing well.

The Government have a choice. They can continue to use the Ofsted report for cheap political capital or they can join hands with Southwark and other authorities across London and work to improve the level of education standards and the opportunities for children in those schools. It is important in the context of the debate to get those issues on the record.

Southwark has few sixth form colleges and as a result young people rely on Southwark college and other further education colleges outside the borough. A number of other obstacles have been placed in the way of young people, to which my hon. Friends have referred, especially the perverse incentive behind funding for further education which now acts as a deterrent to many young people who wish to pursue further studies. For example, in 1992, Southwark was forced to take the decision to withdraw the funding of transport costs for young people going on to further and higher education.

I have collected a catalogue of instances from my own constituency that show how essential bus fares are to make it practical and possible for motivated young people to travel to FE and higher education colleges. They also show a depth of motivation that is deeply moving. Twin sisters who lived in east Dulwich studied at Southwark college. Their parents could not afford to pay two bus fares every day, so when the bus fares were withdrawn the twins attended the college in alternate weeks. That illustrates that these are people who are desperate to continue to improve their skills. They see education and training as the way out of their present circumstances. They have had no proper help from the Government.

We are talking about young people who were born at the beginning of 17 years of Conservative government. The concern about this lost generation of young people is palpable wherever we travel. I have talked especially about the young people whom I represent and young people in Southwark. The hopelessness of so many should act to stir the conscience of the Government and make them act. The evidence is that they will not do so. They will simply make cheap political jibes. The opportunity for our young people lies only in the election of a Labour Government, who will be determined to see their inclusion in the mainstream of society as useful and valued young people with a clear sense of their own worth.

1.40 pm

Mr. Michael Stephen (Shoreham): The hurricane of change that has swept through the entire western world during the past 10 years is nothing short of a second industrial revolution. At the same time, the western world has gone through the worst economic recession since 1929, one that has turned upside down the economies of the United States, France, Germany, Australia, New Zealand and almost every other developed country. The United Kingdom did not escape. It is fatuous to place the blame for that at the Government's door.

Those events have made it impossible for old industries to survive and for old patterns of work to continue. The end of the cold war has meant that new sources of cheap labour have opened up in eastern Europe along with new markets. Asian countries are now awakening and competing with us in low-tech and, sometimes, high-tech industries. That applies especially to information technology. It is now possible for a mail-order company, say in my constituency, to upload raw data via satellite to Pakistan, India or China, where the data will be processed by low-cost keyboard operators.

We live in a different, high-tech world. The education and training of our young people for the world of work is vital. Similarly, retraining is vital. Whether Governments like it or not, it is impossible now to guarantee a job for life. We must be flexible and retrain.

The Government take training immensely seriously, and I shall refer briefly to some of the many schemes that they have introduced. The youth training scheme has trained 4.5 million young people since 1983. Career development loans enable young people to purchase vocational training. There is also the Investors in People scheme; the job interview guarantee scheme; the training for work scheme, which provides places for 200,000 young people; and the job clubs. We know that 90 per cent. of 16-year-olds are in full-time education or training.

I have listened carefully to most of the speeches in the debate. I have yet to hear any constructive costed proposals as to how the Labour party, if in government, would do better or, indeed, do anything. Labour Members can only carp and criticise. No constructive proposals ever pass their lips.

There are 1.5 million places on employment and training programmes for the year 1996-97. I pay tribute to the work of the Industry and Parliament Trust, which arranged a conference at St. Andrews only two or three weeks ago, which the hon. Member for Oldham, Central and Royton (Mr. Davies) and I attended. A serious effort was made at the conference to identify the problems that face young people, and not-so-young people, who are seeking work. Employability was considered from all possible angles. We had the opportunity to interview people who were unemployed and in need of retraining. We heard from them, from a practical point of view, what was needed. I commend the trust's report on the conference, which I understand will be published in two or three weeks' time.

Not all people can benefit from training. Some people do not have the temperament or the mental ability to benefit from a training course and perhaps do not want the responsibility that goes with a skilled occupation. I do not want a country which is rich enough to pay generous benefits. I want a country in which a useful job is found for everyone. Therefore, even in this high-tech age, we must find manual jobs for people who cannot or will not acquire a skill. I ask the Government to consider again the various forms of workfare scheme that have been proposed.

Industry provides most of the training opportunities in this country. When I visit industries in my constituency and elsewhere, I ask them what involvement they expect from the Government in training. The answer I get is almost always, "The role of Government is to provide us with young people at 16 or so with a good basic education. We want young people who are good at reading, writing and basic numeracy. We will do the rest. We will train them for our industry."

Only yesterday, I had a meeting with the directors of Lucas Industries, one of Britain's most successful manufacturers. They told me that they had established three training schools at Cwmbran, Tamworth and Wolverhampton to train people for their company. The schools also admit people who do not work for the company and charge them fees, which go to help pay for the school. I asked the directors whether they were worried about other industries poaching the young people whom they had trained. They said that they could live with that and it was sometimes an advantage for people who had been trained by the company to work for other companies which might be their customers or suppliers.

As for the need for basic education, it is astonishing that, although the Government have provided more money per child for education than ever before in the nation's history, the results are so poor. That is partly due to the fact that we have a federal system of education. Central Government provide the money and are expected to take the responsibility, but the education, or what sometimes passes for education, is delivered by local authorities, many of which are left-wing authorities which still employ the half-baked education theories of the 1960s. Two local authorities in point are Islington and Southwark, where concerned parents in the parliamentary Labour party have taken their children away to be educated in other parts of the country.

The British grammar school was the institution that provided the professionals, engineers and scientists who made this country great in the 19th and early 20th century. The Labour Government committed a crime of the highest order against the children of this country when they destroyed the grammar schools. It is a matter of great regret to me that when my party came back to power in 1979, all that we could do was to save those that had not been destroyed. We should have restored the grammar schools. Perhaps it is too late to do that now, but I endorse the Government's scheme for grant-maintained status, which will be a way of restoring the ethos of the grammar school and of giving head teachers, governors and parents the ability and incentive to create a really good school in their area.

The public schools are also a source of excellence in our country. I want to bring all our schools up to the standard of the public schools. I want nothing to do with socialist policies which would destroy our public schools or make it almost impossible for people of modest means to send their children there.

I believe in selection because it is impossible for mixed-ability teaching to work. If we ever had any doubts about that, we must look at the record of the past 30 years. Even the Labour party believes in selection because it talks about setting and streaming and about educating children of different abilities separately. If that is not selection, what is? There must be competition in schools because, in the outside world, the children will have to face competition. If they are artificially protected from it, when they get out into the world, they will not be able to cope.

I believe also in discipline in schools. It is wrong to deprive headmasters of the ability to discipline pupils. We must think again about corporal punishment in schools. We must make it clear to parents that, if they enter a school and assault a teacher, it will be treated not just as an assault, but as an aggravated assault, and will attract the severest penalties when they come before the courts.

Finally, it is a question not just of education and ability, but of attitudes. Most young people are well motivated, but not all. In my constituency, a young man was given a job. On his first day, he asked for a day off. He said that he did not think that he would be fit to come to work the following Thursday because his friend was having a birthday party the night before. The employer said, "We can do better than that. We will give you the rest of the year off. Goodbye."

1.50 pm

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): I have enjoyed the debate and do not intend to contribute much to it. I should like to express my appreciation for some Conservative Members' speeches, especially that of the hon. Member for Mid–Kent (Mr. Rowe), and that of the hon. Member for Mid–Staffordshire (Mr. Fabricant), who shares with me the view that there is nothing wrong with the English education system that making it a Scottish education system could not put right, and I speak as someone who was educated in England. The speech of the hon. Member for Shoreham (Mr. Stephen) shows that the lessons of social Darwinism have been taught thoroughly in university and taken to heart.

I put my name down to speak in the debate because, two weeks ago, I attended a meeting in my constituency with leaders of the council, officers and elected committee chairmen. At the end of it, the chief executive spoke movingly of the "lost generation"—the phrase came to his lips. He talked of the drug problem in my constituency. Rotherham has high unemployment—it is around 12 per cent. Twenty-five per cent. of people under 25 are out of work. Nearly half of the Pakistani population under the age of 25 is without work. That lost generation needs to be discussed. Policies need to be devised to try to help those people out of that world of darkness and into the world of work, where they can make a useful contribution to society.

In Rotherham, people are turning to drugs. There has been an increase in drug-related crime and most schools are reporting the selling or use of cannabis and harder drugs. In the past 12 months, there have been six drug-related deaths in a part of the world that has had many difficulties, but that is not—I think my friends in Rotherham would agree—part of the fast and loose world of big cities. The people involved in drugs are also part of the lost generation.

[Mr. Denis MacShane]

We are doing much good work in Rotherham to try to analyse the problem and to deal with it. I pay tribute to the business community and to the Prince's Trust, which does an excellent job. How pleased I was to see President Chirac in Easterhouse yesterday examining the initiatives undertaken by the trust.

Part of the analysis undertaken was the focus group's inquiry conducted in one of the comprehensive schools in my constituency. I should like to report what was said. Young people were asked what they wanted out of life and what they thought the reality would be. They said that they wanted to be a mechanic, a sports teacher, to work in a bank or to go to college—not high ambitions. What did they think would happen to them? They would go to prison or go on the dole and they said:

"If we get a job parents will lose benefit."

That is the living reality of our future citizenry, and it has not been addressed much by Conservative Members.

I apologise to the Minister if I am not here for the whole of his winding-up speech. I hope that he will remember the five-letter word "sorry", because 17 years of not taking responsibility cannot be dealt with in a 10-minute speech. The debate started with the absurd sight of a Scottish Minister praising the A-level system. If there is anything more ridiculous than a little Englander being a little Englander, it is a little Scot being a little Englander. The debate will finish with no concrete suggestion likely to be put into Government policy, despite the helpful suggestions by the hon. Members for Mid-Kent and for Mid-Staffordshire.

In my constituency, the college of education is this week in the process of dismissing 80 members of staff: it is happening as I speak. There is an increase in hopelessness in Rotherham. The careers service has been taken away from the council, which is not even allowed to bid for it, and a rigged bid by Nord-Anglia will ensure that there is reduced access to careers advice for my constituents.

Of course Labour is addressing those matters, but perhaps our suggestions were not put in the round. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown), the shadow Chancellor:

"Dare to be a Daniel,
Dare to stand alone,
Dare to have a purpose firm,
Dare to make it known."

If we can take money from the parents of children who are at Eton and use it to help the 16, 17 and 18-year-olds who are out of work in Rotherham, I would be prepared to defend that. We need a system that offers the unskilled a ladder out of poverty and we need to return value to work so that it is worthy of respect. Value needs to be returned to family life, to parenting and to the household. Above all, we need to return value to education through much higher and stricter standards. That is the way in which we might begin to help the lost generation which, under the Tories, will be condemned to keep losing.

1.56 pm

Mr. Stephen Byers (Wallsend): This has been a valuable and important debate addressing the needs and concerns of a group of young people who all too often are ignored in the considerations and proceedings of the House. It has starkly revealed the divide in the Chamber. With one or two notable exceptions, especially the speeches by the hon. Members for Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe) and for Mid-Staffordshire (Mr. Fabricant), Conservative Members have displayed deep complacency and neglect for the needs of the people whom we are debating. They have shown bankruptcy in ideas and poverty in aspiration, and those are the clear signs of a tired Government in their dying days.

My hon. Friends have delivered extremely useful, positive and practical speeches. The contributions by my hon. Friends the Members for Streatham (Mr. Hill), for South–East Staffordshire (Mr. Jenkins), for Lewisham, East (Mrs. Prentice), for Dulwich (Ms Jowell) and for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) revealed the needs of their communities and the way in which young people have been damaged and have had opportunities denied to them as a direct consequence of the Government's policies.

There has been a denial of skills, to the extent that people in the west midlands are proclaiming that there is a skills deficit. The Government's introduction of market forces to the careers service has caused problems, especially in south London. Those were clearly identified by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, East. The South Thames training and enterprise council has been allowed to become bankrupt. When it was put into receivership, the Government did not lift a finger to help. As a result, private sector training providers are owed about £4 million to £5 million, which is unlikely to be repaid. They will compensate by cutting existing provision, thereby denying places to even more young people.

A common thread has run through Opposition Members' speeches—that we want to extend access for 16 to 19-year-olds. We want high-quality provision, diversity and excellence for all. That commitment and objective contrasts starkly with what we heard from the Government today.

The first industrial revolution relied on innovation and enterprise, and on investment in fixed capital, buildings, plant and machinery. The Opposition believe that the knowledge-based revolution of the 21st century will require investment in human capital—the skills and intelligence of our people. That will mean equipping men and women to cope with enormous economic and social change, to meet the needs that are all around us. For no age group is that more important than for 16 to 19-year-olds.

To meet the challenge of the future, we must enable our young people to cope with change. Otherwise, the demoralisation of job insecurity will threaten their employment prospects and the economic and social stability that underpins a socially cohesive and civilised society. Security resulting from the ability to cope with rapid change distinguishes Labour's proposals from the present Government's support for an insecure labour market that undervalues the skills and needs of the people on whom it depends.

We can meet the challenge of creating a high-tech, high added value, high-wage economy only by skilling our people so that they are able to provide quality products and services—in other words, we shall need a high-quality work force. That means paying special attention to the education and training needs of our 16 to 19-year-olds.

We should regard that age group as our biggest resource for future development, yet far too few people in that age group are gaining the skills and qualifications which they need and which are vital to the future well-being of our economy.

The Government are selling our 16 to 19-year-olds short. They are the innocent victims of the Government's neglect of this important area. The Government pursue policies that create the conditions for personal failure and despair. There is a direct link between the lack of quality training and education opportunities for 16 to 19-year-olds and Britain's crisis of youth unemployment.

Today's 16-year-old with no skills or qualifications is tomorrow's unemployed 23-year-old. The Government's most important role in that regard is to provide a secure framework in which young people can stay on in education and training to develop their skills and enhance their learning so that, when they leave education, they can get a job, be promoted in that job and improve their prospects of finding a new job if they lose the one that they have.

The challenge that confronts us as a nation is that, if we are to have lifelong education, with all the benefits that flow from it to the individual and our country, we must provide equality of opportunity and access for all after the age of 16. There can be no escaping the fact that it will require a major reform of the funding of post-16 education. At present, opportunities are denied to hundreds of thousands, which damages not just the individuals involved, but our society as a whole. Perhaps the biggest scandal is the lack of progress that has been made over the past 35 years.

Staying-on rates for young people from households of unskilled manual workers have hardly increased. Entry to university has remained stagnant. In 1963, Robbins reported that just 2 per cent. of children from semi-skilled families went to university. The latest study from the university careers service shows that only 3 per cent. of children from unskilled families gain a degree.

Mr. Rowe: Is the hon. Gentleman comparing like with like? Most studies seem to suggest that the proportion of the population that falls into that unskilled category has shrunk.

Mr. Byers: I am comparing like with unlike unfortunately, because it has been shown that there is a lasting problem: that young people from unskilled families are not entering higher education. That figure has remained constant over the past 35 years.

Unequal opportunities are not just an affront to those of us who feel passionately about social justice, but an economic disaster in a world where education increasingly determines employment opportunity, earning power and national prosperity. The question that the Labour party is prepared to address is how to end the cycle of educational failure, unemployment and poverty. It is clear that to do so, we must bring to an end the national education lottery at 16. At present, some 16-year-olds receive grants while others do not for exactly the same educational courses, and some have their fees paid while some do not. Current educational maintenance allowances are both arbitrary and inadequate—they range from 90p a week in some areas, up to as much as £20 a week in others, with as few as one in 1,000 obtaining them in some local education authorities.

It is against that background that we make no apology for establishing our public spending review of post-16 education finance. The review will examine loans, grants, educational maintenance allowances, course fees, tax relief and child benefit from the age of 16. The review has only just begun, so no decisions have yet been made. But our intentions have been widely misrepresented and distorted by Conservative Members, who, all too often, prefer prejudice to stand in the way of facts.

Today, I shall put some facts on the record. There is not, and never has been, any intention to include in the review, child benefit where it is available as a right—where it is universal. That means that child benefit will continue to be available to all mothers of children up to the age of 16. But, at present, at 16, child benefit ceases to be a right or to be universal. Mothers of 43 per cent. of 16 to 18-year-olds do not receive any child benefit—that means that the mothers of 846,000 young people do not receive child benefit.

Mr. Tim Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Byers: No.

It is also important to note that, in real terms, child benefit brings no extra money to most financially disadvantaged families because child benefit is deducted, in full, from the income support received by income support claimants. Almost one in five mothers who receive child benefit are also on income support. Therefore, they do not gain financially from receiving child benefit.

Labour's review of post-16 education funding will be based on five clear principles. First, the policy must ensure value for money and the most effective use of public finances. Secondly, it must improve participation rates significantly by ensuring that no financial hurdles stand in the way of young people's taking advantage of post-16 education. Thirdly, it must introduce a coherent system that operates nationally. Fourthly, it must provide financial assistance more fairly rather than withdrawing support. Finally, it must broaden opportunities and ensure genuine equality of opportunity.

We are confident that when our review, which is based on those five principles, is completed and the policies brought forward, they will command broad and popular support. They will stand in stark contrast to the tired policies of the Government, who can offer only the discredited youth training programme. That is the only option for young people who decide that full-time education is not for them.

However, as Sir Ron Dearing illustrated clearly, the programme is failing many of our young people. He found that only 46 per cent. of young people who enter youth training schemes complete the course of study. The breakdown according to training and enterprise council areas is even more revealing. In Merseyside, 72 per cent. of all young people who start youth training fail to complete the course. In Sunderland, the figure is 66 per cent. and, in Norfolk and Waveney, it is 63 per cent. Only one in five training and enterprise council areas has a completion rate better than 50 per cent.

For those reasons, Labour has introduced its Target 2000 programme: a high-quality training initiative that will offer hope to a lost generation. The initiative has been costed at £1.5 billion and it will be financed by the money

[Mr. Byers]

that we shall save by abolishing the youth training programme and the money that will flow from the windfall tax on the newly privatised utilities. My hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown) has made it clear that the money will be targeted at two specific groups: the long-term unemployed and the young unemployed. Those two programmes will be funded by the windfall tax on the privatised utilities. We aim to kick-start the economy by giving our young people high-quality training opportunities.

Mr. Tim Smith *rose—*

Mr. Byers: I shall not give way, as time is limited. If the Minister were to allow me to use some of his speaking time, I would be happy to give way. However, he will not do that, so I shall not give way.

Our policies have been worked out in conjunction with employers. We are confident that, although the Government have ignored and neglected them, our new deal for the lost generation represents a co-ordinated programme that will boost the quality of education and training for that age group. Our programme is based on a real partnership between young people, a Labour Government and employers. We share the rights and the responsibilities associated with building a future for ourselves and our nation. Through that partnership, we shall begin to prepare our country and our young people to meet the challenges of the new century.

2.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Andrew Mitchell): This has been a most interesting, and in some cases illuminating, debate and it has occurred on a day when another socialist Administration has been unceremoniously booted out of office—the third in recent weeks. The hon. Member for Oldham, Central and Royton (Mr. Davies) opened for the Opposition with a very interesting speech. He accused my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Smith) of not reading the right papers to discern Labour policies. Conservative Members were mesmerised as we waited for the various answers that he promised but, despite the great length of his speech—45 minutes—none came to light.

The windfall levy—a remarkable, reusable, elastic tax that appears to have quite extraordinary regenerative qualities—has been mentioned. It has already been pressed in aid for 11 different uses by Labour spokesmen. As the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) made clear, the Liberal party is at least honest about this—money cannot be spent more than once. The Liberal Democrats at least admit that their proposals would lead to an increase in income tax. Today their spokesman expressed a withering contempt for Labour proposals that will have been echoed in all parts of the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe) made an interesting speech that included a plea for back to basics in primary education. He praised the league tables that the Government introduced in the teeth of opposition from the Labour party and wisely advised the Government to build on our achievements and not to uproot for its own sake.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield made a robust, wise and convincing speech. He exposed the fallacy of Labour policies. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Staffordshire (Mr. Fabricant) spoke warmly of his local training and enterprise council and the success of local schemes. He made a number of interesting suggestions to Sir Ron Dearing and his speech was thoughtful, if not politically correct—except when he agreed with the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane). That happens to us all from time to time, but it is easily curable.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shoreham (Mr. Stephen) brought considerable expertise to the debate, particularly in respect of training, which he uses so well in the service of his constituents. He made a useful speech, inveighing against the fashionable nostrums of the 1960s which caused so much damage to children's education.

I cannot forbear to mention the hon. Member for Rotherham who, thanks to the generosity of both Front Benches, made a six-minute speech. As usual, it was both witty and original, but unfortunately not simultaneously.

We then heard from the hapless shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Wallsend (Mr. Byers), who was sent to the House to spin away the ghastly mess that his party has got into in respect of child benefit. I approached today's debate as the Minister with responsibility for child support, which is a central issue.

The debate takes place against the background of the welcome further fall in unemployment that was announced this week. The reductions in the number of people out of work for a year or more and in youth unemployment are particularly welcome. Long-term unemployment is down by 80,000 on a year ago and youth unemployment is down by 64,000.

Despite the various figures that have been batted backwards and forwards today, the United Kingdom now has the lowest unemployment rate of any major European country. It is lower than that in Germany, France, Italy or Spain, and well below the 11 per cent. average for Europe. We are reaping the benefits of our trade union and supply-side reforms, our opt-out from the social chapter and the absence of a statutory minimum wage.

Today's debate underlines the key point that our world competitiveness demands a highly motivated, adaptable and well-trained work force. My hon. Friend the Minister of State mentioned the modern apprenticeship scheme, which is a success story. There is strong demand for it. It is the work-based route to higher skill levels. Already, 25,000 young people are taking advantage of it. The Government are playing a supportive role—providing financial help and facilitating the partnership at national level; industry and employers are in the driving seat.

Close links between education and employment remain the key, as has been made clear in our competitiveness White Papers. As my hon. Friend the Minister of State mentioned in his opening remarks, 92 per cent. of secondary schools now have links with business, and more than 190,000 teachers have had placements in business since 1989.

When I left university—just before Mrs. Thatcher became Prime Minister—only one in nine people went into higher education. Now, the figure is one in three. The

Conservative party understands the role of Government in facilitating the right economic circumstances in which markets—businesses—create jobs and opportunities for young people. The Labour party does not understand that. As *The Sun* said so eloquently in an editorial yesterday:

"Labour is full of . . . contradictions. Yesterday we saw another one as plans to train and find work for 16 to 25-year-olds were unveiled.

But Governments can't create jobs—only businesses can do that.

And yet Labour would cripple business with the social chapter and a minimum wage."

If we want to help young people into work, we should not introduce a national minimum wage—as my hon. Friends the Members for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) and for Beaconsfield pointed out. Commentators of all political persuasions have acknowledged that a minimum wage would destroy jobs.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development studies, the International Monetary Fund world economic report and the European Community White Paper "Growth, competitiveness and employment" all acknowledge that a statutory minimum wage would have a damaging effect on employment prospects. Even the deputy leader of the Labour party has made it clear that a minimum wage would destroy jobs, yet Labour persists with this totally counter-productive proposal.

Even if people on low wages still had a job to go to, a minimum wage would be an ineffective way to help them. Most low-paid workers live in households with two, or even three, earners. Research by the Institute of Fiscal Studies shows that the richest 30 per cent. of the population would gain more from a minimum wage than the poorest 30 per cent.

Conservative policies of welfare into work have proved to be successful. The growth of family credit, enhanced support of child care and the panoply of into work measures that the Government have introduced have helped people into the labour market. By contrast, Labour's policies would lead from work on to welfare, particularly for younger people, who are the subject of today's debate.

Neither would a minimum wage help people who receive in-work benefits. Many are already paid in excess of £4 an hour. In practice, a minimum wage would result in job losses that would hurt those currently in low-paid employment and hurt the taxpayer, because reduced employment inevitably leads to higher benefit bills.

As to the grotesque debacle of Labour's plans for child benefit, they are—as has been elegantly pointed out by an unholy alliance of just about everyone apart from the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor—wrong in principle, wrong in practice, based on inaccurate information and research, and likely to achieve precisely the opposite result from that intended.

We had the assertion from the shadow Chancellor that 80 per cent. of children from homes with unskilled parents do not stay on at school after the age of 16. Were that to be the case, it would be truly appalling. It was the case in 1978, after nearly four years of the last Labour Government, but the picture has changed considerably. Whereas, under Labour, only 20 per cent. of children of unskilled parents stayed on at school after the age of 16, the figure now is 56 per cent. and rising.

Having wrongly analysed the problem, Labour presented its solution—removing child benefit from 16, 17 and 18-year-olds, which would take £560 a year away from families with one child. That proposal would result in the UK being the only country in Europe not to provide help to families with 16 to 18-year-olds in non-advanced further education.

For less well-off families—the very group that Labour suggests it wants to help—the loss of child benefit could make the difference between keeping their children in education and requiring them to go out to work so that they can make a contribution to the household budget. The hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) pointed out in an article in the *Evening Standard*:

"I know of many young people and families who rely on Child Benefit to help them out and enable them to continue in education. We should maintain that and put more money into education for the young."

Labour would achieve the very thing that its absurd proposal started out trying to avoid.

What was billed as an example of Labour making "tough choices" on spending is instead a spectacular example of Labour shooting itself in the foot—as my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister said,

"not so much pay as you earn but rather pay as you learn."

It is also, effectively, an increase in taxation. Child benefit replaced child tax allowances, and the effect of Labour's proposed change, of removing £560 each year from families with one child, would be the equivalent—as my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne said—of a 5p hike in income tax for families on average earnings. That is Labour's teenage tax.

The potential damage is even graver. The hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) said:

"We now need a clear statement by the party Leadership that Labour will stand by its past pledges to retain Child Benefit in full".

If the Labour party is prepared to remove child benefit for 16, 17 and 18-year-olds, what is the rationale for keeping it for younger children? Children become more expensive as they get older. The hon. Member for Brent, East has rightly spotted that the withdrawal of child benefit for 16 to 18-year-olds is the thin end of the wedge. There is no logical reason for paying child benefit for children of compulsory school age if it is not needed for older children, as the Labour party's leadership now apparently believes.

I shall now deal with the new suggestion from the hon. Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown) that child benefit should be withdrawn only from those at fee-paying schools—a suggestion that found an echo in the Chamber today. That proposal would affect about 75,000 children and save about £40 million a year. Withdrawing benefit on the basis of the type of school attended, as was subsequently suggested, would penalise parents' efforts to do their best for their children. That is a particularly nasty piece of socialist ideology that shows that the green-eyed god of envy is alive and well on the Opposition Benches and sits happily with that other act of spite promised by new Labour—abolishing the assisted places scheme, which currently helps 60,000 families.

We have seen all this in the very week when the Labour party has argued in another place that foreigners who have no right to remain in this country should be able to claim child benefit while simultaneously seeking to deny it to the parents of A-level students who have lived here all their lives.

As Labour's social security spokesman said, we need to set priorities for the social security budget. Labour has now revealed what an astonishing set of priorities it really

[Mr. Andrew Mitchell]

has. Its policy on child benefit will hurt not only young people—the Opposition spokesman on social security has not enjoyed it either. On 18 April, the shadow Chancellor's team briefed the press that Labour would abolish child benefit for 16 to 18-year-olds. We know that he did not consult his colleagues in the shadow Cabinet. A few days later, the Opposition spokesman on social security was in the House answering questions, and it was perfectly clear to every hon. Member that he wanted to be anywhere but here, having to defend that ludicrous and ill-thought-out policy.

All that demonstrates that a Labour Government would be an unmitigated disaster for young people. We have known about some of Labour's disastrous policies for some time. It has, for example, been committed to a minimum wage throughout the lifetime of this Parliament. I should think that, after such failures, it would now steer clear of policies designed to damage young people's prospects—but no.

On Wednesday, the Leader of the Opposition announced his plan to take away more of the opportunities that we have created. He lined up the shadow Chancellor, the shadow Home Secretary and the Opposition spokesmen on education and employment and on social security. We were supposed to witness the strength of the unity of the shadow Cabinet, but—as the hon. Member for Bath said—the smiling faces did not hide the gulf between them.

On Wednesday, we witnessed the unveiling of another unthinkable policy for young people. The shadow Cabinet announced that Labour would compel every employer to train 16 to 18-year-olds on their staff for one day a week. Labour's new document states:

"Everyone under 18 who does not have level two qualifications should be studying, normally off the job, for at least six hours a week or equivalent. Employers will have an obligation to ensure that this happens for their employees."

That is absurd, and it is also extremely bureaucratic. How would Labour check that every employer of a young person had trained them for the requisite number of hours? Would there be a new corps of inspectors with clipboards and stopwatches? It is not a well-thought-out policy. More important, it would be a disaster for any young person looking to learn a trade or to do an apprenticeship.

Private sector employers are training young people—including the modern apprentices I mentioned earlier—because they want to, not because they have to. Employers are, increasingly, training young people. Labour would make training compulsory and turn training young people into a cost and a burden—something that employers do because Whitehall tells them to do it—rather than an opportunity. Employers would resent training, instead of valuing it.

Employers would respond by choosing to employ people aged over 18 whom they could train in the right manner for their company rather than in the manner decided by a Labour Government. Labour would, therefore, give employers a strong reason not to take on young people.

On Wednesday, the Leader of the Opposition claimed that he had a "new deal" for Britain's young people, but it is not so much a new deal as a raw deal. We can now detect the substance behind the soundbite. Under a Labour Government, fewer young people would stay on in school. Under a Labour Government, fewer young people would get jobs. Under a Labour Government, fewer young people would get the right training. Under Labour, young people would be forced to start their lives on benefit, which is hardly the best foundation for a successful working life.

Labour's rhetoric claims that its policies are about welfare to work. In fact, its policies are about work to welfare, and young people would suffer most of all. The Opposition try to have it both ways. They announce that they have all the answers for young people, and then try to shroud their policies in mystery. As my hon. Friends have asked, why is it necessary for Labour to hide its policies behind several reviews if such policies would be so beneficial? The answer is that Labour's policies would not help young people.

Labour would take away young people's chances and make it far harder for them to prepare successfully for their working lives. As this debate has shown, a Labour Government would be an unmitigated disaster for young people. We Conservatives will not hesitate to remind the electorate at every opportunity of that fact.

Mr. Bowen Wells (Lord Commissioner to the Treasury): I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion, by leave, withdrawn.

SCOTTISH GRAND COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That—

(1) the Order of the House [11th December] be further amended, as follows—

(a) in paragraph 10, by leaving out the words "in Scotland on Monday 10th June" and inserting the words "in the County Buildings, Ayr, on Monday 10th June";

(b) in paragraph 11, by leaving out the words "in Scotland on Monday 17th June" and inserting the words "in the City Hall, Perth, on Monday 17th June to take Questions for oral answer and"; and

(c) in paragraph 12, by leaving out the words "in Scotland on Monday 8th July" and inserting the words "in the Easterbrook Hall, Dumfries, on Friday 5th July"

and

(2) notwithstanding the Orders of the House [11th December and 29th January]—

(a) the Chairman shall interrupt the proceedings on Monday 17th June at half-past One o'clock; and

(b) the Committee shall meet on Friday 5th July at Two o'clock and the Chairman shall interrupt the proceedings at half-past Four o'clock.—*[Mr. Wells.]*

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Wednesday 5th June, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion in the name of Mr. Tony Newton relating to the language of parliamentary proceedings not later than one and a half hours after their commencement; and the said Motion may be proceeded with, though opposed, after Ten o'clock.—*[Mr. Wells.]*

Town Centres

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Wells.]*

2.30 pm

Mr. Chris Davies (Littleborough and Saddleworth): Change is usually so gradual that we hardly notice it taking place—until one day someone points out that it has not been for the better, whereupon we join together to criticise those who were so lacking in foresight at the time that they stood by and allowed these adverse things to happen. For once, however, we can see a change taking place before our very eyes. We cannot pretend that we have not been warned of the dangers which the growth of out-of-centre retail developments poses to our town centres.

It is now 20 months since the Select Committee on the Environment warned that many small town centres were vulnerable to lasting damage. I fear that the Committee underestimated the effect that such developments can have even on large towns and cities.

Across the country the story is all too common and all too familiar. Once-vibrant town centres are dying on their feet and the hearts of our communities are left bleeding.

This is not the first time that the Minister has responded to a debate on these very points. He did so in March last year, when he told the House that

"we are all agreed on the correct way forward."

We want, he said,

"vital and viable town centres that are attractive . . . and desirable to everyone to shop in."—[*Official Report*, 15 March 1995; Vol. 256, c. 998.]

Amen to that—but if the Chair will excuse the expression at a time when the subject is so tender: where is the beef?

The Minister told the House 14 months ago that he recognised hon. Members' concern that a quick response was needed by way of new planning policy guidance paper 6, which deals with this matter. It has yet to be published. A draft was circulated many months ago, and a very weak document it appeared to be. I hope that the final version—I anticipate its publication in the next few weeks—will have far more teeth.

The Minister told the House then that policies would have to be monitored continually to ensure that they were effective. I am afraid that monitoring is about all that seems to have been done—any sign of effectiveness is sadly lacking. Yet the pace of expansion of out-of-centre retail developments shows no signs of slacking.

The Government fiddle while Rome burns. If we are to save our town centres, firm and decisive action is needed now. Let me highlight the extent of the problem. Almost 30 per cent. of all retail sales are made out of town, and projects in the pipeline will shortly increase that to about 50 per cent. The retail economy of small market towns can be destroyed by the construction of a large single supermarket on their outskirts. Even bigger towns and cities are left reeling from the effects of some of the huge mega-developments that have been built. Dudley, of course, has gained a place in history for being the first town in Britain to lose 70 per cent. of its trade to one such development—the Merry Hill complex.

In addition to the new retail space already opened, millions of square metres are still in the pipeline. Close to my constituency, the huge new Trafford centre at Dumplington will devastate the towns of Greater Manchester, while the effects of the White Rose centre in west Yorkshire will be felt mostly in Batley and Dewsbury. I suspect that even Leeds and Wakefield will not escape the consequences. For the present, Oldham and Rochdale are holding their own. Indeed, the centre of Oldham is thriving thanks to much new investment, but the edges are fraying badly. In terms of travel times, Oldham and Rochdale will be equidistant, along the motorway, between the new Trafford centre and the new White Rose centre and that is not an encouraging prospect.

Last summer, I visited nearly every shop in my constituency and I spoke to some 200 shopkeepers in Littleborough and Milnrow, in Shaw and Uppermill, in Lees and in my village of Greenfield. Only a handful of the people to whom I spoke were optimistic about their long-term future. One of the first meetings that I attended as a new Member of Parliament was called by concerned local traders in Delph who were anxious about the future of shopping in their village.

The question is whether Parliament sees that there is a problem to be addressed at all. Perhaps it is right that old town centres are killed off by the new retailing palaces. I do not think it is right because I do not want to see our town centres decaying gradually and I do not believe that Members of Parliament want that. There is a general consensus on both sides of the House that town centres should survive and prosper as the vibrant hearts of their communities.

It may be argued that the big retailers and the property developers are simply responding to consumer demand, but I believe that they are shaping consumer demand. That may be good for their businesses, but it is bad for the health and well-being of the community as a whole. Environmentally, the new developments are a disaster. The motor car is now the single biggest producer of carbon dioxide, which is one of the main greenhouse gases, and the new developments are a driving force behind car dependency. Even the Government have recognised that in planning policy guidance paper 13. Those without cars, the poor and the elderly, cannot reach the new developments. They are left isolated and they cannot enjoy the benefits. The development of mega-shopping complexes results in the destruction of jobs, not their creation. They destroy full-time jobs and replace them with part-time work.

I do not believe that the developments are necessary. Let us take, for example, the new Trafford centre at Dumplington. No doubt, when it is opened, people from across the north-west will be enticed to get in their cars and drive to it. They will travel there in great numbers and they will desert our existing towns and city centres to do so. But not one of my constituents has told me that he is looking forward to the opening of a new mega-shopping complex at Dumplington. The only people who want it are the property developers and it would not be missed if it were never opened and matters were simply left as they are. No one would miss it.

What is to be done? What could a Government do if they wished to do something about the problem? What the Government should not do is give the House yet another complacent response, with the Minister expressing his sincere concern but in practice delivering nothing. Instead, the Minister should show some real strength and announce today that the Government will take immediate

[Mr. Chris Davies]

steps to impose a moratorium on all planning consents for out-of-centre developments not yet implemented. That would be a decisive move which would buy breathing space for the Government while they prepared a long-term strategy. It would also give much relief to town centre shops that are threatened by the new schemes.

Next, the Government should make it clear in their new planning policy guidance paper 6 that no out-of-centre developments will be given planning permission unless the applicants can prove that the development will not affect the vitality and viability of existing town centres. That would be a reversal of the existing situation, because at present the burden of proof lies with local authorities. They must prove, to ensure that their objection carries weight, that a development will have an adverse effect on the vitality and viability of town centres. That means that developers have to make only minimal commitments. They take no risks and go laughing to the bank.

From experience as a member of the Oldham planning committee over the years, I can tell the House that it is extremely difficult to prove that a new supermarket or a new non-food retailing business being built on the edge of town will cause immense harm. Each applicant and each application may be so small as not to require an environmental impact study. However, danger lies in the cumulative impact of such developments. One application follows another, applications are considered at separate meetings and before councillors know where they are they are giving their approval to millions of square feet of new retailing space away from established town centres.

Even if planning officers recommend and gain the support of councillors to impose conditions on the range of items that can be sold in out-of-town developments to try to prevent damage being too severe, such conditions are easily eroded over a short period. In an average large supermarket, about 40 per cent. of all sales are of non-food items. A shop might be called a food store but in practice the nature of what goes on underneath its roof is changing rapidly. Does that have an effect on the vitality and viability of our towns? The answer is simple: of course it does.

The Government could win many friends among small shopkeepers if they would turn their attention to adjusting the rate valuations of shops in town centres. I suspect that the burden that town centre shopkeepers bear is out of proportion to the volume of their sales. If town centre shopkeepers are paying more than their fair share, that must be stopped.

We cannot ignore the need to make town centres more convenient and attractive for those who wish to use them. With the appointment of town centre managers, many local authorities, including Oldham and Rochdale, are doing their best with minimal resources. I would like to see the same attention paid to smaller towns in my constituency such as Shaw and Milnrow. But I suspect that in reality some of the mega-shopping complexes are able to spend more on the purchase of their Christmas trees each year than the average local authority is able to spend on a town centre during an entire year.

I am interested in the initiative that has been taken in Coventry, where a private company has been created to manage the city centre. It has responsibility for maintaining, managing and marketing the town centre, thereby encouraging people to use local shops and other facilities. It has responsibility also for street cleaning and patrolling car parks. It provides everything from security systems to Christmas decorations, which bring people into town at the tail end of each year.

I understand that the private company in Coventry has only one local councillor among its directors. Such an arrangement would not be acceptable to my party. But the idea of concentrating on the single goal of encouraging activity in the town centre and paying for that through a combination of public and private finance is attractive.

It is essential too that we fill the hole in the doughnut. For too long British town centres have suffered from the obvious defect that no one lives in them. Encouragement should be given to provide accommodation and to bring people back to live over the shop or in new homes. I welcome the Government's initiatives in that respect. I am sure that the Minister would admit, however, that as yet they are hardly on a scale that is likely to make much impression nationally.

Town centre improvements will cost money. The Minister recognised that when he spoke to the House a year or so ago. He said that the Government were actively considering how such projects would be funded. Perhaps the Government's interpretation of the word "actively" differs from mine. I do not yet see the money pouring forth.

Let me suggest to the Minister how substantial sums could be raised to improve town centres in a way that would establish a more level playing field between out-of-centre developments and town centre shops. It is simply the imposition of a levy on car parking spaces at out-of-centre developments and devoting the money raised entirely to improving public transport and to measures to improve town centres and help them adjust to the massive changes that are taking place. The out-of-centre stores would pay the bill and pass the cost on to customers. In so doing, the huge price advantage which their buying power gives them over smaller shops in town centres would be reduced.

I am sure that the Minister will note with amusement the headlines in some newspapers this morning which announced that it would be part of the new Labour party's transport policy to ensure that car parking charges were levied at out-of-centre developments. In the last couple of hours a statement has emerged from Labour party headquarters that that was an error and the Labour party would not dream of imposing any such charges. That is all too familiar behaviour from the new Labour party. It makes promises but does not suggest how they would be paid for. That is not the case in this instance with the Liberal Democrats. We make it clear that such a commitment should be made and that if people have to pay to use town centre car parks they should also have to pay to use out-of-centre car parks.

Why should people be discouraged by the cost of using town centres and enticed instead to out-of-centre locations by the differential in car parking charges? That happens simply because developers take advantage of the Government's failure to provide effective planning controls.

I hope that I have made it clear to the House that a host of positive and practical steps could be taken to protect and stimulate our town centres. There is no excuse for doing nothing. I ask the Minister to think of the long term,

tell the House what sort of town centres he wants to see and explain what steps he will take to ensure that they are brought about.

2.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment (Sir Paul Beresford): Although I agree with the criticisms made by the hon. Member for Littleborough and Saddleworth (Mr. Davies) of the Labour party, the Liberal Democrats can make promises knowing that they will never be in a position to fulfil them. It is probably fair to say that the hon. Gentleman has not been with us long and will not be with us very long. I am afraid that that showed in some of the comments that he made. He did not seem to be aware of what was going on. He talked about regulations and pushing down on business, rather than of using the techniques available to the Government to encourage business.

The hon. Gentleman focused mainly on planning issues and it is probably worth dealing with them first. We have set out our aims for the town centres. They are to sustain and enhance the vitality and viability of town centres, to focus development—especially retail development—in locations which allow all consumers to benefit, and to maximise the opportunity to use means of transport other than the car, while recognising the importance of the car. The hon. Gentleman is married and I presume that his wife does the weekly shop in the supermarket. I am sure that she would thank him very much if she had to traipse home with the 80 or 90 lb of weekly shopping on the bus. She would have arms as long as an orang-utan's.

We also aim to ensure the availability of a wide range of shops, employment, services and facilities to which people have easy access by a choice of means of transport. Those objectives were set out in planning policy guidance note 13. It advises local authorities that town and district centres should be the preferred locations for developments that attract many trips and that they should adopt planning polices to locate major developments which generate a lot of travel in existing centres, where access by a choice of transport—not only the car—is easy and convenient.

PPG13 further advises local authorities to adopt policies to enable town, district and local centres to meet the needs of residents in their area; to safeguard and strengthen existing local centres in both urban and rural communities, which offer a range of day-to-day community, shopping and employment opportunities; to maintain and improve opportunities for people to walk, cycle or catch public transport; and to ensure an appropriate supply of attractive, convenient and safe parking for shopping and leisure trips.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned PPG6, which we published in revised form in July 1993. That refocused development towards town centres. It was introduced in the light of the effect of out-of-town shopping centres and was reviewed almost immediately by the Select Committee on the Environment.

As the hon. Gentleman has said, before he came into the House, there was a debate that the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), speaking on behalf of the Labour party, called a love-in. That was a slight exaggeration, but what he meant was that there was considerable agreement. The Government agreed with the points that were made as well.

That debate, in effect, set the sequential approach: developers and local authorities should look, first, for town centre sites and, only if those sites are unavailable, for edge-of-centre sites. Only when sites in existing centres, including district centres, have been exhausted should out-of-centre sites be considered, and those would have to be accessed by a choice of means of transport.

We expect flexibility and realism. Local authorities must be realistic about the sites that they suggest. Developers need to be more flexible about the format and scale of development and parking and servicing arrangements. Developments need to fit in with local circumstances. I must stress again, however, that the plan-led and sequential approach applies not just to shopping, but to other key town centre uses. We want town centres again to be the focus for development and to take advantage not only of their accessibility, but of the synergy that can be achieved. Our policies on out-of-centre development apply as much to shopping as to offices and to leisure and other facilities that attract many people, including housing.

Of course, there is much more to it than just planning. We have touched on transport. The Government's approach on transport involves bus deregulation, privatisation, the provision especially of light rail and trams and tube investment, which has come from both Government and the private sector. The private finance initiative is the in-phrase.

We have also improved and encouraged, especially in London, local control of parking and its enforcement. That has had an effect in persuading people to use public transport. We have promoted, pushed and backed financially the development of local town centre management. That has been supported by the Government and by councils and businesses together, because businesses recognise its importance. Businesses are now coming in. Many businesses that were promoting out-of-town shopping centres are now working in towns. Particular tribute should be paid to Boots and Marks and Spencer, which have been joined by Sainsbury, Esso, Brown and Root and many others.

The Government understand the difficulties faced by some urban, rural, town and city centres. Especially where long-established traditional industries have declined, the economies have suffered and, in some cases, more affluent residents have moved out. Change is a fact of modern life, but it is the root of our wealth as well, so we must seek a sense of continuity. That is the source of our confidence and well-being.

We need to help towns and cities adapt to the changing demands of the modern economy, an economy which must compete internationally. We have specifically targeted those areas. In the past five years, we have invested almost £1.8 billion through urban development corporations alone, £300 million through housing action trusts, £1.7 billion through estate action and almost £800 million through city challenge. Much of that money has been backed by even greater investment from the private sector. In relation to the single regeneration budget, £1 of public sector money generates between £3 and £4 from the private sector. When the private sector is there, it is there for keeps and because it knows that our inner cities are working.

Many other projects have been undertaken or are in hand. They include the urban programme, task forces, business start-up schemes, local initiative funds,

[Sir Paul Beresford]

compacts, funds for teacher placements, education business partnerships, the training and enterprise challenge, programme development funds, regional enterprise grants, section 11 grants, ethnic minority grants, safer city projects and ethnic minority business initiative and city action teams. Almost £2 billion has been invested in those projects in the last five years.

Those projects are catalytic. They are drawing in the private sector and drawing people back into cities, which have been rejuvenated and rationalised under the single regeneration budget. In the next few years, a further £2 billion of SRB challenge fund money will lever in £5 billion of private sector finance. That encourages people to bring business back into inner cities and to live and to look for their leisure there—that is the right way to do it. We should not apply regulations on the outside.

Most, but not all, of the target schemes have been run by my Department. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Department for Education and Employment delivers extensive training and enterprise and enterprise and vocational training initiatives through the training and enterprise councils. Next year alone, the TECs will have access to £1.2 billion. The hon. Gentleman will also know that the Department of Trade and Industry is active in business sponsorship at local level. This year it will provide, again through the TECs, almost £50 million for the establishment of business link networks and more than £80 million for business support services.

Of course money can help, but the source of initiative and enterprise lies in the encouragement of people. It is proper for the Government to give a helping hand, not a hindering hand, and then to get out of the way. The biggest factor is the national economy. Low inflation, low interest rates and high investment are the reasons why this country is doing better than any country in Europe.

Contrary to the Liberal Democrat approach, we have undertaken a programme of cutting red tape, of removing unnecessary burdens on small and big business and of getting rid of the bureaucratic silliness that occupies time and inhibits enterprise. Already, 640 regulations have been repealed or amended and another 400 are in the pipeline. For example, 500,000 of the smallest businesses no longer need to have their accounts audited. We have simplified the trade mark legislation, thus saving businesses £30 million a year, and we have implemented new systems in government to ensure that cost compliance and risk assessments are undertaken before new legislation is presented. Those are simple, important and effective measures that particularly help inner cities. They cut costs and save time. Perhaps above all, they remove unnecessary sources of irritation for the men and women who work in business and in small businesses in inner cities.

The Government are striving to improve education standards, especially in the inner cities. We want to lift the schools so that they become attractive and people will want to place their children there in anticipation of a decent education. There is local choice in those schools and competition. The local management scheme is but one example, and there are grant-maintained schools offering new opportunities and nursery vouchers.

The Liberal Democrat response to nursery vouchers was "ridiculous". The Liberals are behind the times and damage many places. Let us look at one that is not far from here. Leatherhead is being strangled by the Liberals who are on the county council and the district council. In the inner-city sphere, Tower Hamlets is in a mess and the Liberals had power there for four years. All we got was the whiff of incompetence and local corruption. Local government has a huge role to play. It can frequently be damaging and enormous council taxes are a trade mark of the Liberal and Labour parties, as are poor services and obstructive, slow, bureaucratic procedures.

Mr. Chris Davies *rose—*

Sir Paul Beresford: I shall not give way. The hon. Gentleman will not be here for long and he may as well learn.

The Liberals' obstructive, slow, bureaucratic performance and their resistance to compulsory competitive tendering and to working with the private sector are notorious. They are backing Labour in areas such as Liverpool. That beautiful city is struggling. I met a deputation from there yesterday. It has strikes, and poor performance, and every time the council touches CCT, it fails. Its workers have voted to strike. My teenage daughter has a saying that she throws at anyone who gets things really wrong. With a snarl and a curl of her lip that only a teenage young lady can show she says, "Get real." The hon. Gentleman ought to do that.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at two minutes to Three o'clock.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 7 May 1996

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Criminals (Damages Claims)

Sir Ivan Lawrence: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department on how many occasions since 1990 persons convicted of crime have subsequently been successful in claiming damages from the victim of that crime for the offender's loss and personal injury; and if he will make a statement about eligibility for legal aid in bringing such claims. [27389]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: Figures about such claims are not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Civil legal aid may be available to an individual wishing to bring such a claim through the courts of England and Wales, subject to the standard tests on the merits of the case and financial eligibility.

Asylum and Immigration Appeals

Mr. Alton: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what budgetary allocation was made in *(a)* 1994–95 and *(b)* 1995–96; what allocation has been set aside for 1996–97 for the immigration appellate authority; and is the allocation within that budget in each of those years, for special adjudicators hearing asylum appeals. [27173]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: The table shows the overall budgetary allocation for the years requested. The immigration appellate authorities do not keep a record of the allocation made specifically to special adjudicators hearing asylum appeals, and the table shows the amount allocated to all judicial costs in all areas of the appellate authorities' work.

Year	*Overall budgetary allocation (£)*	*Judicial allocation (£)*
1994–95	3,755,603	2,386,000
1995–96	4,793,057	2,648,762
1996–97	7,931,512	4,122,604

Mr. Alton: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the actual or protected outturn of *(a)* immigration appeals in total, *(b)* substantive asylum appeals and *(c)* fast track asylum appeals in (i) 1994–95, (ii) 1995–96 and (iii) 1996–97. [27174]

Mr. Evans: It is not possible to provide separate figures for *(b)* and *(c)* as the immigration appellate authorities do not distinguish between these categories when recording determined appeals. I am able to provide the following information:

Adjudicators

Year	*Total*	*Asylum*
1994–95	23,587	3,196
1995–96	21,282	8,354
1996–97 (projected)	33,630	19,970

Immigration Appeal Tribunal

Year	*Total*	*Asylum*
1994–95	1,859	388
1995–96	1,230	510
1996–97 (projected)	1,900	1,430

Employees' Rights

Ms Jowell: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (1) what provision is available to employees of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contract, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case; [27584]

(2) what provision is available to employees of executive agencies under the control of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [27585]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: The Lord Chancellor is responsible for four executive agencies. For the Lord Chancellor's Department, the Court Service and the Public Trust Office, the information is set out in the table. I have asked the chief executives of the Land Registry and of the Public Record Office to reply separately.

Scheme	*Provision available*	*Criteria used to judge eligibility*
(a) Maternity leave	(i) 14 weeks statutory maternity leave, retaining right to return to same job;	(i) available to all staff, regardless of status, subject to proper notification and the provision of a maternity certificate;
	(ii) 18 weeks, combination of statutory maternity leave and unpaid special leave, with right to return to work on no less favourable terms and conditions of employment than held before absence;	(ii) must qualify for statutory maternity pay (see below);

Scheme	Provision available	Criteria used to judge eligibility
	(iii) 14 weeks paid maternity leave plus unpaid maternity leave up to total maximum absence of 52 weeks from the date maternity leave begins, with right to return to work on no less favourable terms and conditions than held before absence.	(iii) must be in paid service at the time the leave begins and have rendered at least one year's such service overall; must not be employed on a casual, standby or short notice basis or on a fixed term contract of less than two years; must give a written undertaking of intention to return to work after maternity leave and produce a maternity certificate;
	(iv) additional paid or unpaid special leave may be granted.	(iv) on written application, at personnel officer's discretion, dependant upon individual circumstances
(b) Maternity Pay	(i) 18 weeks statutory maternity pay; first 6 weeks at 90 per cent. of average weekly earnings in the eight weeks prior, 12 weeks at the set rate, currently £54.55;	(i) must have 40 weeks service by the expected date of childbirth; have average weekly earnings of not less than the lower earnings limit for the payment of National Insurance contributions; still be pregnant by the 11th week before the expected week of childbirth, or have given birth by this time; must provide proper notification and produce a maternity certificate.
	(ii) 14 weeks at full pay, and notional statutory maternity pay where appropriate.	(ii) as for paid maternity leave above.
(c) Paternity leave	Two days paid special leave, either at the time of birth or in the following weeks.	Available on written application
	An additional five days paid special leave if exceptional or unforeseen domestic difficulties arise at the time of birth or immediately afterwards. (see also parental leave below)	Available at local management discretion, dependant upon individual circumstances
(d) Parental leave	for adoptive mothers, up to 20 days special leave with pay plus unpaid leave up to a maximum absence of 52 weeks;	Available on written application
	if a woman does not exhaust her entitlement to unpaid maternity leave, the balance of leave is taken into account when considering a later application for unpaid special leave for childcare purposes, either from the woman or her spouse if he is also employed by the Department civil service.	Available at personnel officer's discretion, dependant upon individual circumstances
(e) Flexible working hours	Flexible working hours arrangements may be introduced or revised in any office.	Dependant upon discussion between staff and line-management and their trade union representative at local level.
(f) Part time work *(g)* Job sharing	Anyone can apply to work part-time or to job-share.	Available at local management and personnel officer's discretion, dependant upon individual circumstances
(h) Leave to care for sick children	Up to five days special leave with pay in any one year may be granted locally;	Available on written application at local management discretion, dependant upon individual circumstances
	Additional paid and/or unpaid special leave and/or career break may be made available if this appears justified in the particular circumstances.	Available at personnel officer's discretion, dependant upon individual circumstances.
(i) Home working	The Department does not specifically recruit staff to work at home on a permanent basis. Available as a temporary measure.	Available at local management and personnel officer's discretion, dependant upon individual circumstances
(j) Term-time contracts *(k)* Annual hours contracts	Contracts are not offered although existing staff may apply for annual hours and term-time contracts	Available at personnel officer's discretion, dependant upon individual circumstances
(l) Workplace nurseries	44 nursery day care places are available for children under five; and approximately 75 playscheme places for children five to 12 years old which are used during the main school holidays.	Waiting lists are maintained where the Department cannot meet the demand for places at a new or existing nursery venture. In allocating places, the Department observes the Equal Opportunities Commission's "Good Practice Guide", as recommended by the Cabinet Office in January 1992. Generally, playscheme places are allocated on a first-come, first-served basis but occasionally preference is given to "essential" staff whose skills and experience are particularly needed by the Department.
(m) Childcare allowances	None	N/A

Scheme	*Provision available*	*Criteria used to judge eligibility*
(n) Carer's leave	Up to five days special leave with pay in any one year may be granted; Additional paid and/or unpaid special leave	Available on written application at local management discretion, dependant upon individual circumstances
	and/or career break may be made available if this appears justified in the particular circumstances.	Available at personnel officer's discretion, dependant upon individual circumstances
(o) Career break schemes	Staff who have successfully completed their probationary period.	Must have a good record of attendance and performance. Available at personnel officer's discretion, dependant upon individual circumstances

Letter from John Manthorpe to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 7 May 1996:

I have been asked by the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, to reply to your recent question on the provision and eligibility criteria of a number of conditions of service. I can supply the following information:

Employees of HM Land Registry may benefit from the following provisions under the agency's conditions of service. Eligibility criteria, where applicable, are shown in the text:—

(a) Maternity Leave:

(i) Irrespective of an individual's length of service, a minimum of 14 weeks maternity leave is allowed.

(ii) Paid maternity leave of 3 months and 1 week is allowed where the individual:—

— states their intention to return to work for a minimum period of 4 weeks;

— undertakes to repay maternity pay, less statutory Maternity Pay, if she fails to return;

— is in paid service with the agency when she starts maternity leave, and has given at least one year's such service;

— is not employed on a casual basis, and

— is not employed on a fixed term contract of less than 2 years.

(iii) The earliest date from which the period of paid maternity leave can commence is the beginning of the 11th week before the expected week of confinement.

(iv) Unpaid maternity leave may be granted up to a further 41 weeks starting with the week in which the baby is born, to a maximum possible absence of 52 weeks (11 weeks prior to the expected date of confinement plus 41 weeks maximum unpaid leave).

(b) Maternity Pay:

Staff who qualify for paid maternity leave under item *(a)* (ii) above receive their normal rate of pay for the period concerned. In other circumstances statutory maternity pay is payable.

(c) Paternity Leave:

Fathers are entitled to two days paid paternity leave, which may be taken at the time of the birth or during the weeks following (eg when the mother leaves hospital.) Paternity leave cannot, however, be paid during periods of unpaid absence.

(d) Parental Leave:

Paid special leave of up to one week may be granted to assist staff in coping with unforeseen short term domestic problems, including the care of a child. Unpaid special leave for longer periods may also be granted. All applications for special leave are considered sympathetically in light of the circumstances.

(e) Flexible Working Hours:

Staff have the option to work flexible working hours subject only to very limited shift-working requirements. There are no specific criteria, save that a small minority of staff may be excluded for disciplinary reasons.

(f) Part-time Work:

The agency allows part-time working wherever possible. a minimum of 16 hours per week is encouraged. No specific criteria apply other than the need to have regard to the existing working patterns in order to avoid operational difficulties. Staff are able to opt for a wide range of working patterns, such as whole or part days, or combination of whole or part days.

(g) Job Sharing:

The agency provides opportunities for full-time posts to be shared by two employees. There are no specific criteria and no posts are automatically excluded. The agency will require to be satisfied that the arrangements in each case will meet operational requirements, and part-time working might offer a suitable alternative in the event of difficulty.

(h) leave to Care for Sick Children:

Paid special leave of up to one week may be granted for short term care of sick children, in order to provide initial assistance in relation to unforeseen circumstances. Unpaid nursing leave may be granted for longer periods. All applications for special leave are considered sympathetically in light of the circumstances.

(l) Home Working:

The agency does not operate home working except on an occasional, short term basis, to assist individual staff as part of their recuperation from injury or ailment.

(j) Term-time Contracts:

The agency considers requests for term-time working under its part-time working arrangements. Requests are accommodated by the granting of unpaid leave of absence during school holidays. Such requests are met wherever operational circumstances allow.

(k) Annual Hours Contracts:

The agency has no current provisions for annual hours contracts.

(l) Workplace Nurseries:

Two offices have workplace nurseries, each of which caters for up to 40 children aged from 6 weeks to 5 years. Staff at a third office have access to an interdepartmental nursery led by the Home Office, catering for a similar age range. All staff employed by the Agency at these locations are eligible to play for a nursery place for their child(ren). The agency also has holiday playschemes at 18 offices.

(m) Childcare Allowances:

The agency does not operate a system of childcare allowances. The running costs of nursery places are subsidised and the user parents pay a reduced fee.

(n) Carer's Leave:

Unpaid special leave may be granted to care for elderly or infirm relatives, dependants or partners, or where heavy domestic responsibilities have been borne for a long time. All applications for special leave are considered sympathetically in light of the circumstances.

(o) Career Breaks:

The agency operates a career break scheme, offering unpaid special leave for up to 5 years, with an option to extend for a further 2 years in appropriate circumstances. The scheme is intended to help staff deal with caring responsibilities or where an individual's health has suffered as a result of past responsibilities. In order to take a career break under the scheme staff must:

—be a permanent member of staff;

—have one year's paid service of 16 or more hours per week, and

—have a satisfactory work performance and a satisfactory attendance, conduct and health record.

A 'keeping-in-touch' scheme operates in tandem with the career break scheme for those who wish to participate.

Letter from Duncan Simpson to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 7 May 1996:

In the absence of the Chief Executive, who is away from the Office on official business, I have been asked by the Lord Chancellor's Parliamentary Secretary to reply for the Pubic Record Office to your question about the provision available to employees in the agencies for which he is responsible.

The provision available to employees of the Public Record Office, with the criteria used to judge eligibility, is:

(a) Maternity leave

Established staff and fixed term appointees are entitled to three months and one week paid maternity leave providing they

1. intend to return to work

2. have worked one year (in the past three) and

3. are currently working.

A further period of unpaid leave up to a combined total of 52 weeks is available.

Limited period appointees are not eligible.

(b) Maternity pay

Established staff and fixed term appointees are entitled to normal salary for three months and one week and to 18 weeks Statutory Maternity Pay.

Limited period appointees who have worked continuously for at least 26 weeks and continue into the 15th week prior to the expected week of confinement may be eligible for 18 weeks of Statutory Maternity Pay, at the discretion of management.

(c) Paternity leave

Established staff and fixed term appointees are entitled to 2 days paid paternity leave.

(d) Parental leave

Available to established staff and fixed term appointees, at the discretion of management.

(e) Flexible working hours

Available to established staff and fixed term appointees in appropriate posts.

(f) Part-time work

Available to all employees, subject to operational needs. It is also allowed to members of staff who return to work after a period of sick absence.

(g) Job sharing

Available to all employees, subject to operational needs.

(h) Leave to care for sick children

As for (d) above.

(i) Home working

Available at the discretion of management.

(j) Term-time contracts

Not used.

(k) Annual hours contracts

Not used.

Workplace nurseries

Not available.

Childcare allowances

Planned for introduction in 1996/97, subject to the availability of resources.

(n) Carer's leave

As for (d) above.

(o) Career break scheme

Unpaid leave up to 5 years is available for established employees at the discretion of management.

TREASURY

Late Payments

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much was paid late to the private sector for goods and services by his Department in 1995–96. [26144]

Mrs. Angela Knight *[holding answer 24 April 1996]:* In 1995–96 the Treasury paid 9 per cent. of legitimate private sector invoices more than 30 days after their receipt and 91 per cent. on time. This figure reflects the clearing up of outstanding and disputed invoices and improvements to the Treasury's payment performance. In most cases the Department would have discussed the reason for the delay with the supplier, for instance to resolve disputes concerning the invoice or the delivery.

VAT (Errors and Fraud)

Mr. Andrew Smith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the consultants' report drawn up for Customs and Excise on errors and fraud in VAT repayments will be completed; if he will place a copy in the Library; what was the percentage of payments incorrectly made; and how much revenue is involved. [27331]

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: The customs internal consultants' review covers the more complex areas of the VAT repayments credibility system. Work is proceeding to the timetable advised to the Public Accounts Committee by the chairman of Customs and Excise. The consultants' study of percentages of repayments incorrectly made, and the amount of revenue involved, is expected to be finalised in August 1996 when the PAC will be updated on the findings.

The full report will contain details about checks on repayment claims, that would be of great advantage to potential fraudsters. In these circumstances it would be inappropriate to place a copy in the Library.

Earnings

Mr. Byers: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what percentage of employees in *(a)* each region and *(b)* nationally earned (i) less than £1.50 per hour, (ii) between £1.50 and £2.50 per hour, (iii) between £2.50 and £3.50 per hour, (iv) between £3.50 and £5 per hour, (v) between £5 and £10 per hour, (vi) between £10 and £20 per hour and (vii) in excess of £20 per hour in 1995 prices for each year since 1986. [27133]

Mrs. Angela Knight *[holding answer 29 April 1996]:* The information is contained in several tables which I will arrange to have placed in the Library.

Public Sector Pension Funds

Mr. David Shaw: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what was the annual cost of lump sum payments paid by each public sector pension fund in (i) 1974, (ii) 1979 and (iii) the most recent year available; [27333]

(2) what was the annual cost of pensions paid in each public sector pension fund in (i) 1974, (ii) 1979 and (iii) the most recent year available. [27334]

Mr. Waldegrave: Comprehensive figures are not available in the form requested. Information is available only for some of the centrally administered public service schemes and, for the earlier years in question, cannot always be disaggregated.

The schemes shown are all unfunded and expenditure comes from moneys voted by Parliament in estimates.

Information that is available is as follows:

	1974–75	*1979–80*	*1994–95*	*£ million*
Civil Service	[1]141.5	[1]421.9	[1]1,859.6	—
	[2]61.2	[2]151.6	[1]399.0	—
Armed Forces			[1]1,218.9	
	n/a	n/a	[2]329.8	—
NHS	82.6	299.3	[1]1,334.2	—
			[2]321.0	—
NHS (Scotland)	9.2	36.4	[1]181.7	—
			[2]50.1	—
Teachers	150.9	430.5	[1]2,106.9	—
			[2]499.5	—
Teachers (Scotland)	22.5	58.1	[1]219.5	—
			[2]51.8	—

[1] Pension.
[2] Lump sum.
n/a not available.

Adjusted for 1994–95 prices using GDP deflator

	1974–75	*1979–80*	*1994–95*	*£ million*
Civil Service	[1]741.7	[1]1,053.6	[1]1,859.6	—
	[2]320.8	[2]378.6	[2]399.0	—
Armed Forces	n/a	n/a	[1]1,218.9	—
			[2]329.8	—
NHS	433.0	747.5	[1]1,334.2	—
			[2]321.0	—
NHS (Scotland)	48.2	91.0	[1]181.7	—
			[2]50.1	—
Teachers	791.0	1,075.1	[1]2,106.9	—
			[2]499.5	—
Teachers (Scotland)	117.9	145.1	[1]219.5	—
			[2]51.8	—

[1] Pension.
[2] Lump Sum.
n/a not available.

Figures relate to retirement pensions and related lump sums including ill-health, death gratuities, family benefits and pensions increase payments. Where one figure is shown this represents the combined expenditure on pensions and lump sums.

Post-war Credits

Mr. Shore: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the total sum of post-war credits paid out since 1 January 1979; and what is his estimate of the amount left unclaimed. [27781]

Mr. Jack: The total sum of post war credits paid out in the period 1 January 1979 to 31 March 1996 is £3,640,938.82. This includes interest which amounts to £1,002,577.36. It is estimated that £33 million remains unclaimed.

Employees' Rights

Ms Jowell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what provision is available to employees of executive agencies under the control of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, (l) workplace nurseries, (m) child care allowances, (n) carers' leave and (o) career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [27595]

Mrs. Angela Knight: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the chief executives of the Royal Mint, the Office for National Statistics, the Valuation Office and Paymaster agencies. I have asked each of them to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Langford to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 7 May 1996:

In your question to the Chancellor (ref 27595) you asked a number of questions relating to conditions of service within the Agency. The following address the questions in the order posed:

a) Maternity leave: Women are entitled to three months and one week paid maternity leave if they:

have one year's cumulative employment (continuous or broken, casual or permanent)

are not employed on a casual basis or on a fixed term appointment of less than two years at the time the leave begins.

are not on unpaid leave at the time

can confirm in writing that they intend to return to work for the Agency after their baby has been born.

A further period of unpaid maternity leave may be taken subject to the total leave not exceeding fifty two weeks.

If the employee does not qualify for maternity leave the Agency allows up six months' unpaid leave to be taken during or following pregnancy.

b) Maternity pay: The entitlement is three months and one week on full pay. Any further leave taken is unpaid.

c) Paternity leave: Men are entitled to two days paid leave which may be taken before or after the baby is born.

d) Parental leave: The Agency provides up to five days paid special leave in cases of urgent domestic distress, at any one occasion. This is based on management discretion. Unpaid leave may be granted for longer periods.

e) Flexible working hours: The Agency operates a flexible working hours system which allows the employee to arrange their working days to meet their domestic (at the discretion of management).

f) Part-time work: The Agency operates a part-time system with a minimum of fifteen working hours and a maximum of thirty hours per week. The Agency, at the discretion of management, endeavours to meet the employees requests for their preferred hours of work.

g) Job-sharing: The Agency, at management's discretion, provides Job-sharing opportunities for staff wishing to work for only part of the day.

h) Leave to care for sick children: The Agency may allow up to 5 days paid special leave in cases of care for sick children at any one time. This is based on management discretion.

i) Home working: The Agency does not have this scheme.

j) Terms time contracts: The Agency does not have this scheme.

k) Annual hours contracts: The Agency does not have this scheme.

l) Workplace nurseries: The Agency does not have this scheme.

m) Child care allowances: If the employee is sent on a course by the Agency and has to pay additional monies for child care, the Agency will pay up to £40 per week to help meet the costs.

n) Carers leave: The Agency does not grant paid leave to the employee when their carer is on holiday. The employee may be granted special leave without pay. This is based on management discretion.

o) Career break schemes: The Agency allows up to five years unpaid leave for career breaks. This time is not pensionable however any days that are worked for the Agency during this time are:

All criteria are set out in the VOA's Staff Handbook. Management's discretion applied in the circumstances identified above.

Please let me know if I can assist further.

Letter from Keith Sullens to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 7 May 1996:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply to your question about special leave etc arrangements.

The following provisions are available to PAYMASTER staff;

(a) Maternity leave.

Leave to attend ante-natal care and up to 52 weeks paid and unpaid maternity leave.

(b) Maternity pay.

Three month's and one week's paid maternity leave providing the expectant woman has been working for one year at the start of the maternity leave and intends to return to work. Statutory Maternity Pay is payable subject to the normal rules.

(c) Paternity leave.

Two days paternity leave is allowed either at the time of the baby's birth or when the mother leaves hospital if this is more beneficial for the family.

(d) Parental leave.

Special leave may be granted to parents as necessary including for adoptive purposes.

(e) Flexible working hours.

Flexible working hours are available to all staff at PAYMASTER including part-time staff. Staff may work their contractual hours between 7.00am and 7.00pm.

(f) Part-time work.

We are prepared to consider any part-time working arrangement providing it is acceptable to the individual's line management. Currently 130 people work part-time representing 20% of all staff at PAYMASTER.

(g) Job sharing.

Many of the part-time posts are held on a job share basis but this is not always a requirement for working part-time.

(h) Leave to care for sick children.

Parents may be allowed up to 5 days leave with pay to care for sick children. The amount of leave granted depends upon individual circumstances.

(i) Home-working.

We do not employ anyone on home working contracts.

(j) Term time contracts.

We do not employ anyone on term time contracts. Several staff are employed on short notice contracts and one member of staff is employed on a part-year basis.

(k) Annual hours contract.

We do not employ anyone on annual hours contract.

(l) Workplace nurseries.

PAYMASTER has a workplace nursery with 27 places.

(m) Child care allowances.

We do not have any plans to introduce child care allowances.

(n) Carers leave.

Short term care may be provided by short periods of special leave with and without pay. For long term care a career break of up to five years may be allowed.

(o) Career break.

PAYMASTER career break schemes are available to either men or women who have domestic responsibilities which are difficult to combine with work. To qualify for a career break staff must be employed on a permanent basis, have completed probation and have satisfactory performance and attendance records.

Letter from Tim Holt to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 7 May 1996:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply to your Question on the provisions made available to employees of executive agencies under the control of his Department as far as it relates to the Office for National Statistics.

On 1 April 1996 the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) merged with the Central Statistical Office (CSO) to form a new executive agency—the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Prior to the merger, both departments operated flexible working practices and made provision for special leave for their employees for the purposes of maternity, paternity and other domestic responsibilities.

Like its predecessors, ONS is committed to being an equal opportunities employer which aims to provide working environment where no-one is unfairly discriminated against and where staff feel valued. To this end ONS has made provision for: alternative working practices; special leave of absence; and special childcare arrangements for its staff. Some of the details of these provisions are still the subject of discussion with our departmental trades union side, but the broad outline is detailed below:

Alternative Working Practices

A wide range of alternative working patterns are supported throughout the agency, including part-time working, job sharing, home-working (both formal and informal), and nil-hours contracts. In addition a flexible working hours system is in operation on each site. Other alternative working practices, such as term-time working and annual hours contracts, are also possible, though they are not in use in ONS at present. Alternative working practices are available for all ONS staff where the nature of the work allows.

Special Leave of Absence

ONS operates statutory rules on maternity leave and pay for all pregnant employees regardless of length of service or hours of work. In addition, more generous levels of pay and leave are available for staff depending on their length of service. For example, permanent employees with one year's service or more are entitled to 14 weeks full pay and up to 52 weeks maternity absence. Two days paid paternity leave is available for permanent employees.

Special leave, both paid and unpaid, is granted to staff in order to care for sick children or elderly dependents and is also granted for adoption purposes and a wide range of other domestic responsibilities. In addition, ONS operates a Career Break Scheme of one to five years for staff with significant domestic responsibilities. All permanent staff are eligible to apply for special leave. Special leave for some domestic circumstances is also made available for casual staff with a minimum of three months service. Each case is considered on its own merits.

Special Childcare Arrangements

ONS provides, or buys into, a subsidised holiday placement scheme at all locations, opens to the children of all ONS employees. At the Newport site it has also been possible to make provision for a subsidised nursery. ONS staff are reimbursed for the cost of additional child care expenses where these are incurred as a result of official business outside of normal working hours.

ONS strives to give all employees the opportunity to develop their full potential and will continue to make provisions, wherever practicable, to facilitate individual members of staff who have particular responsibilities for dependents and require alternative working patterns or special arrangements.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Letter from Roger Holmes to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 7 May 1996:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply to your Question about provisions available to Royal Mint employees.

The details as applicable to the Royal Mint are as follows:

(a) Maternity leave: See Annex A.

(b) Maternity pay: 14 weeks paid leave, plus up to a further 37 weeks unpaid leave.

(c) Paternity leave: 2 days paid leave.

(d) Parental leave: Nil.

(e) Flexible working hours: Available to all employees not directly involved in continuous production work, which involves 24 hour cover, 365 days per year. A regular feature in other areas.

(f) Part-time working: Available to all employees. All requests to date have been accommodated.

(g) Job Sharing: As (f) above..

(h) Leave to care for sick children: Each case judged separately on its merits. Up to 5 days paid leave available for domestic emergencies.

(i) Home-working: Nil
(j) Term-time contracts: Nil
(k) Annual hours contracts: Nil

Currently under consideration by an in-house working party on alternative working patterns.

(l) Workplace nurseries: Survey recently undertaken. Not a requirement by staff.

(m) Child care allowances: Nil.

(n) Carers leave: Each case decided on its merits. All requests to date have been accommodated—both male and female.

I trust my reply is helpful.

Royal Mint Maternity Leave

The EC Pregnant Workers Directive 92/85 and the Trade Union Reform and Employment Rights Act 1993 provides the right to all pregnant women, regardless of length of service, to 14 weeks paid maternity leave.

If taken ill during pregnancy paid sick absence may be authorised in the normal way. However, sick pay is not issuable once paid or unpaid maternity leave has commenced.

The entitlement of maternity leave covers 14 weeks paid leave plus a further 37 weeks unpaid leave. Depending on the timing of the leave, there may be an entitlement to a further 4 weeks Statutory

Maternity Pay

When employees give notice of their impending absence on maternity leave they must state in writing their intention of returning to work not less than 37 weeks from the week in which the baby is born.

Employees must give at least 7 days notice, in writing, of their intended date of return.

Whether an employee decides to return to work or not an employee may change her mind at later date.

(i) If an employee changes her mind and decides to return to work, provided she returns not later than 41 weeks after the week of confinement, her resignation may be cancelled and her service may be treated as maternity leave.

(ii) If an employee decides not to return she will have to repay the difference between what she was paid and what she was entitled to (currently 6 weeks pay).

(iii) An employee who wishes to change to part-time duties following maternity leave, cannot demand this of right. Departments will, however, endeavour to assist as work priorities dictate.

It is a requirement of law that a certificate stating the 'expected date of confinement' is supplied to the employers, before maternity pay/leave be granted.

Inland Revenue Office, Salisbury

Mr. Key: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many staff, by grade, are employed at the Salisbury tax office of the Inland Revenue; how many members of the public visited the office in person; and how many telephone calls were received by the office in the last 12 month period for which figures are conveniently available. [27847]

Mr. Jack: Details of the staff currently employed at the Salisbury tax office are as follows:

	Number	*Grade*
Technical staff (Inspectors)	9	(2 in Pay bands A&B, 7 in Pay band C)
Clerical staff	46	(13 in Pay band D, 33 in Pay band E)
Secretarial	2	Permanent staff (+ casual assistance as required)

During the year to March 1996 the Salisbury tax office and tax inquiry centre received 10,126 visits from members of the public and answered 48,626 telephone calls.

Inland Revenue (Mobile Advice Centres)

Mr. Key: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many mobile advice centres are operated by the Inland Revenue; where they are based; what destinations each has visited in the last 12 months for which figures are available; how many staff are normally attached to each mobile advice centre; and how many cases were handled at each destination. [27848]

Mr. Jack: During the year to March 1996 the Inland Revenue operated six mobile advice centres. Two of these were based in Cardiff and the others in Telford, Stourbridge, Exeter and Andover. Each employed between two and four members of staff depending on the location visited. Visits were made to some 300 locations throughout Britain and more than 67,000 inquiries from members of the public were dealt with. No detailed breakdown of these figures is available to show the number of inquiries dealt with at each location.

From April 1996 a further mobile advice centre is operating from Middlesbrough.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Employees' Rights

Ms Jowell: To ask the Attorney-General (1) what provision is available to employees of executive agencies under the control of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, (k) annual hours contracts, (l) workplace nurseries, (m) child care allowances, (n) carers' leave and (o) career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case; [27603]

(2) what provision is available to employees of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [27602]

The Solicitor-General: The following are available in the Departments and agencies for which my right hon. and learned Friend is responsible:

Crown Prosecution Service: all except (i) and (l)

Treasury Solicitor's Department: all except (l) and (m)

Serious Fraud Office: all except (l) and (m)

Government Property Lawyers: all except (e), (l) and (m).

Details of entitlement are set out in the civil service management code or other staff manuals and/or are determined according to the merits of each individual case.

PRIME MINISTER

Engagements

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Tuesday 7 May. [27190]

The Prime Minister: This morning, I had meeting with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further meetings later today.

Hospitality

Mr. Hall: To ask the Prime Minister (1) if the rules for holding fundraising and party political events at No. 10 Downing street are applied to Chequers, No. 11 Downing street, No. 12 Downing street, Dorneywood and Chevening; [27517]

(2) if he will list the date, host and purpose of all non-official party receptions or functions held at No. 10 Downing street and Chequers since November 1990. [27516]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 1 May 1996]:* Ministers under this and previous Administrations have been allowed-at their own or party expense—to host non-official or party receptions or functions in Downing street. All catering, staff and other direct costs must be met by the organisers of the event. Appropriate arrangements are required for security clearance.

The same rules are applied at Chequers, Chevening and Dorneywood within the overall arrangements made by the trustees with each occupant.

The details of individual functions are not a matter for the Government.

DEFENCE

Peacekeeping Operations

15. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the role of British forces in peacekeeping operations around the world with particular reference to mine clearing. [26933]

Mr. Soames: We are making significant contributions to United Nations peacekeeping operations around the world. In the specialised area of mine clearance, the United Kingdom has made a major contribution to training trainers and providing advice in developing an indigenous capability that will continue after peacekeeping forces have withdrawn.

Defence Industry

16. **Mr. Congdon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what level of employment in the defence industry in the United Kingdom is supported by Ministry of Defence contracts. [26934]

Mr. Arbuthnot: I refer my hon. Friend to the oral answer that I gave today to my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway).

Joint Rapid Deployment Force

18. **Mr. Matthew Banks:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the benefits of establishing a joint rapid deployment force. [26936]

Mr. Soames: The joint rapid deployment force will strengthen the UK's capability to project effective military forces rapidly worldwide in support of our interests. It will be capable of contributing to a wide range of operations, whether mounted nationally or as part of the UK's contribution to those mounted by NATO, the Western European Union or the UN.

Forces in Europe (Deployment)

19. **Sir Michael Neubert:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the extent of deployment of British forces in Europe; and if he will make a statement. [26937]

Mr. Soames: British forces are currently deployed in Germany, Cyprus, Italy, Gibraltar, the Adriatic and the Mediterranean, and make a significant contribution to the peace implementation force in Bosnia. Details can be found in the "Statement on the Defence Estimates 1996", presented to the House on 1 May 1996.

Operations Southern Watch and Provide Comfort

20. **Mr. Merchant:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on RAF deployment to Operations Southern Watch and Provide Comfort. [26938]

Mr. Soames: The RAF contributes six Tornado GR1 and one VC 10 tanker aircraft to each operation. The Tornados operate in the tactical reconnaissance role.

Both operations monitor Iraqi activity on the ground in support of UN Security Council resolution 688, which calls on Iraq to cease the repression of its civilian population.

Low Flying

21. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the reason for the low flying by a fast jet over Barnoldswick on 18 April at about 10.15 am. [26939]

Mr. Soames: A Harrier aircraft from No. 20 Sqn., RAF Wittering, on a routine training sortie, carried out a simulated level pass attack on a target some three nautical miles north of Barnoldswick on 18 April at about 10.15 am.

Ministerial Visit (Middle East)

22. **Mr. Simon Coombs:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his recent visit to the middle east. [26940]

Mr. Soames: My right hon. Friend's visit to Israel was made in response to a long-standing invitation. The visit provided the opportunity for discussions on a range of issues, including bilateral defence relations. My right hon. Friend was also able to stress the Government's determination to see a diplomatic solution to the Lebanon crisis and a speedy return to the peace process.

Nuclear Deterrent

23. **Mr. John Marshall:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent representations he has received about the viability of the nuclear deterrent. [26941]

Mr. Soames: My right hon. Friend has received a number of representations from individuals and organisations on aspects of our deterrent forces. The entry into service of Trident ensures that we will have a credible and effective deterrent well into the next century.

Training Areas (Warsaw Pact Countries)

24. **Dr. Goodson-Wickes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress he can report on the use of training areas by British and allied forces in the former Warsaw pact countries. [26942]

Mr. Soames: We plan that the Army will exercise in both Poland and Ukraine in September of this year, subject to final confirmation by the Governments of those two countries. Discussions over other possible training opportunities in central and eastern Europe are continuing. The arrangements under which other allies train in central and eastern Europe are a matter for the countries concerned.

Horseshoe Barracks, Shoeburyness

25. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future of the Horseshoe barracks in Shoeburyness. [26943]

Mr. Soames: Studies are currently under way to identify whether any parts of Horseshoe barracks are surplus to Ministry of Defence requirements and therefore suitable for disposal. The views of the local authorities and local community will be taken into account before any decisions are reached.

Ministerial Visit (Israel)

26. **Mr. Janner:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his recent visit to Israel. [26944]

Mr. Soames: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave today to my hon. Friend the Member for Swindon (Mr. Coombs).

RAF Aircraft Crashes

27. **Mr. Robert Ainsworth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many RAF aircraft have crashed this year; and if he will make a statement. [26945]

Mr. Soames: A total of seven RAF aircraft have crashed in six accidents. Separate boards of inquiry are carrying out thorough investigations in order to determine the causes of each accident and to consider what action may be necessary to minimise the risk of recurrence. In line with normal policy, a summary of the findings of each inquiry will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses in due course.

European Defence Co-operation

28. **Mr. MacShane:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent initiatives on European defence co-operation he has instigated; and if he will make a statement. [26946]

Mr. Soames: We have pursued a number of initiatives in support of the Government's policy on European defence announced in our memorandum of 1 March last year. In NATO, we have actively pursued implementation of measures designed to support development of a European defence identity within the alliance, consistent with the NATO summit agreement of January 1994. In the Western European Union, and in particular during the United Kingdom's six-month presidency of WEU, which began on 1 January this year, we have pursued a number of initiatives, including the establishment of a situation centre and introduction of a progressive exercise programme with the aim of strengthening the WEU's capability to mount and control certain humanitarian and rescue, peacekeeping and other crisis management tasks.

Departmental Performance (Value for Money)

29. **Mr. Miller:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what criteria his Department uses to judge whether it provides value for money; and what assessment he has made of its performance. [26947]

Mr. Arbuthnot: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon.member for Cynon Valley (Mrs. Clwyd) on 2 April, *Official Report*, column *146*.

Service Personnel

30. **Mr. Harry Greenway:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many service personnel are currently stationed in the United Kingdom and how many overseas; at what cost in each case; and if he will make a statement. [26948]

Mr. Soames: Details of deployments by geographical area are published annually in my Department's "UK Defence Statistics" booklet. At 1 January 1996, 178,412 service personnel were deployed in the UK, and were

deployed 52,631 overseas. Information on the associated costs is not available in the form requested and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Nuclear Submarines

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many nuclear-submarine Z-berths there are currently in Scottish coastal waters; which ones have been used in the last 10 years, and when; and if he will make a statement. [28076]

Mr. Soames: The table sets out the usage of Z-berths in Scotland during the period 1992 to 1994. Figures prior to 1992 are not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. Figures for 1995 are not yet available.

Scottish Z-berth usage in days 1992 to 1994

Z-berth	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*
Broadford bay	0	0	0
Brodick bay	0	0	0
Campbeltown	0	0	1
Coulport	51	94	66
Dales Voe	0	0	0
Dalgety bay	0	0	0
Firth of Forth	0	0	0
Glen Mallan	0	0	0
Holy loch	0	0	0
Lerwick	0	0	0
Loch Ewe	0	0	0
Loch Goil	3	14	14
Loch Striven	0	0	0
Portree	0	1	0
Raasay	0	0	0
Rothesay	0	3	0

Mr. Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what monitoring he undertakes of the potential environmental impact of nuclear submarine Z-berths in Scottish coastal waters; and if he will make a statement; [28075]

(2) what assessment he has made of the potential environmental impact of nuclear submarine Z-berths in Scottish coastal waters; and if he will make a statement. [28074]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The Defence Radiological Protection Service—DRPS—regularly monitors areas around UK establishments that support submarine operations to demonstrate that nuclear powered warship operation is neither harming the environment nor resulting in unacceptable levels of public radiation exposure.

DRPS surveys are complemented by the marine radioactivity monitoring programme undertaken by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, which publishes its findings independently.

Unidentified Objects, (Rendlesham Forest)

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the current security classification on the documents his Department holds on the unidentified objects seen by members of the United States Armed Forces in Rendlesham forest, Suffolk in 1980; and if he will make a statement. [27644]

Mr. Soames: The papers held by my Department relating to the alleged events at Rendlesham forest, Suffolk in 1980 are unclassified.

British Service Personnel (Cyprus)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many official complaints as to the behaviour of British service personnel stationed in Cyprus have been reported to the Ministry of Defence in London since 1 January 1996; and if he will make a statement. [27622]

Mr. Soames: My Department has received a number of letters from hon. Members and from members of the public condemning the actions of the three soldiers convicted of the manslaughter of Louise Jensen. While many of them have also included general criticism of the behaviour of some UK military personnel, I am not aware of any separate complaints relating to specific incidents involving service personnel in Cyprus since 1 January 1996.

We will not tolerate behaviour that brings the Armed Forces into disrepute. The vast majority of service personnel based in Cyprus are very well behaved.

Land Mines

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions have taken place with the Italian company Valsella regarding the upgrading of the Ranger land mines delivery system; and if he will make a statement. [27631]

Mr. Arbuthnot: A representative of Valsella attended a presentation given to officials of my Department in September 1995 by the manufacturer of the Ranger land mine delivery system about the potential for upgrading that system.

Office Space

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the square footage and cost of office space rented by his Department and its agencies and the number of his Department or agencies' buildings partly, or fully unoccupied together with the square footage of that unoccupied office space and its estimated rental value where available in each of the past five financial years. [27730]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The information is not held in the form requested and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Employees' Rights

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what provision is available to employees of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case; [27609]

(2) what provision is available to employees of executive agencies under the control of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity

leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [27610]

Mr. Arbuthnot: I shall write to the hon. Member and place a copy of the letter in the Library of the House.

British Service Men's Graves

Mr. Alfred Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what information his Department has evaluated about the recent plundering of graves of British service men killed on the Somme and at Ypres in the first world war; what action he is taking; and if he will make a statement. [27931]

Mr. Soames: My Department deplores the desecration of previously unidentified war graves, wherever they may be discovered throughout the world. Individuals are expected to respect all past battlefields, which may be the last resting place of so many, and not to disturb them.

Where human remains are found, it is the responsibility of the individual to inform the local authorities who, in the case of remains dating back to either of the two world wars, will collaborate with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. The commission, in turn, will arrange for a suitable military funeral in one of its military cemeteries, as close to the original burial site as possible. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission is aware of the content of the article published in the *Sunday Times* for 28 April and has confirmed that appropriate action has been taken.

Rotary Wing Support Helicopters

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when his Department first permitted women in the RAF to serve on rotary wing support helicopters. [28167]

Mr. Soames: The Department first permitted women in the RAF to serve on rotary wing support helicopters in 1991.

Business Subsidies

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the grants and loans provided by his Department to businesses, together with the criteria they have to meet in order to obtain the subsidy. [28185]

Mr. Arbuthnot: It is not the policy of the Ministry of Defence to provide financial subsidies to industry.

Phoenix

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he will announce a decision of the future of Phoenix; and if he will make a statement. [28396]

Mr. Arbuthnot: I hope to make an announcement before the summer recess.

Works of Art

Ms Coffey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many of his Department's works of art are classified as missing. [26935]

Mr. Arbuthnot: One hundred and seven works of art belonging to my Department's collection are classified as missing.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Public Servants (Forum)

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if public servants are eligible to serve as delegates in the forum; under what conditions civil servants will be permitted to be candidates; and which social security benefit payments will be affected by delegates' allowances. [26730]

Sir Patrick Mayhew: Under the provision of the legislation public servants are eligible to serve as delegates in the forum. Pursuant, however, to the Northern Ireland civil service non-industrial pay and conditions of service code civil servants to whom the code applies will not be permitted to serve as delegates in the forum or to put themselves forward as candidates. Similar conditions apply to home civil servants.

The extent to which any social security benefit is affected will depend on the amount of the allowance and the individual's circumstances. Benefits which could be affected by delegates' allowances are: income support, unemployment benefit, invalid care allowance, disability working allowance, incapacity benefit, severe disablement allowance, retirement pension—if the member is a dependant on a spouse's claim—and family credit, for fresh and renewal claims.

"Making Belfast Work"

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many team leaders of the "Making Belfast Work" south and east team there have been in the past two years; how long the present acting team leader has been in position; when a permanent team leader will be appointed; and for what reasons there was no full-time replacement when the acting team leader was recently on leave. [27153]

Mr. Moss: "Making Belfast Work", south and east team has had two team leaders in the past two years. An acting team leader has been in post since February 1996.

A Northern Ireland civil service trawl competition is under way at present to appoint a permanent team leader to the team.

Another team leader has been covering the south and east area until the acting team leader returns from leave. In accordance with normal practice, a full-time replacement is not provided to cover periods of leave.

Dental Caries (Children)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what percentage of five-year-old children in Northern Ireland had dental decay in *(a)* 1990, *(b)* 1992 and *(c)* 1995; and if he will make a statement. [27438]

Mr. Moss: Every two years the British Association for the Study of Community Dentistry conducts a survey of dental caries prevalence in children aged five throughout the United Kingdom. However, the survey did not extend

to Northern Ireland until 1994 and figures are not therefore available for 1989–90 or 1991–92. Figures for 1995–96 will not be available until March 1997. The latest available information, for 1993–94, shows that the mean percentage of five-year-old children in Northern Ireland for whom there is evidence of caries experience is 59 per cent.

Employees' Rights

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) what provision is available to employees of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case; [27586]

(2) what provision is available to employees of executive agencies under the control of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [27587]

Sir John Wheeler: The information requested is as follows:

Subject	*Provision*	*Main eligibility criteria*
a. maternity leave b. maternity pay	3 months and 1 week paid leave for monthly paid staff and 14 weeks for weekly paid staff	Available to permanent staff who intend to return to work after childbirth, are in paid service at the time maternity leave begins and have rendered at least one year's such service.
c. paternity leave	2 days' paid leave	Available to all male officers.
d. parental leave	No specific provision. However in cases of urgent domestic distress, at Departmental or Agency discretion: (i) paid leave to a maximum of 5 days(ii) unpaid leave	All staff are eligible to apply. Each application is considered sympathetically and a decision taken on the circumstances of the individual case, having regard to the effect of such leave on the business needs of Departments and Agencies.
e. flexible working hours	Flexible systems for the attendance of staff are widely available providing scope for individuals to vary times of arrival and departure, length and timing of lunch break and to take time off if they work additional hours.	Available to all staff unless, exceptionally, such provision would have an adverse effect on overall efficiency.
f. part-time work	Available at Departmental or Agency discretion.	All staff are eligible to apply. Each application is considered on the basis of the ability of Departments and Agencies to provide the facility requested and its effect on their business needs, but no request is refused unless there is appropriate objective justification.
g. job-sharing	Available at Departmental or Agency discretion.	As for part-time work (f) above.
h. leave to care for sick children	Paid and unpaid leave available at Departmental or Agency discretion.	As for parental leave (d) above.
i. home-working j. term-time contracts	Available at Departmental or Agency discretion in a limited number of areas at present, with consideration being given to wider application.	Where appropriate, applications are considered taking account of the circumstances of the individual case and having regard to the effect on the business needs of the Department or Agency.
k. annual hours contracts	Not available.	—
l. workplace nurseries	Available on a limited basis, for the children of staff working in the Northern Ireland Office, London (See also Note 1)	Places allocated in order of application.
m. childcare allowances	At Departmental or Agency discretion where this can be justified on value for money grounds. At present the Child Support Agency and the Department of the Environment provide assistance towards the cost of an employee placing a child in a nursery of the parent's choice.	(i) one of the parents/guardians must be an employee of the Department or Agency; (ii) the nursery must be registered with the relevant Health and Social Services Board; (iii) the allowance is payable only until the child begins primary school.
n. carers' leave	At Department of Agency discretion: (i) paid leave to a maximum of 5 days; (ii) unpaid leave.	As for parental leave (d) above.
o. career break schemes	At Departmental or Agency discretion unpaid leave may be granted for any period from one year up to a maximum of 5 years.	All staff are eligible to apply. Career Breaks are available for most purposes including further education, domestic responsibilities, starting a business, maintaining a family business or a stay abroad.

Currently eight holiday play schemes, which are open to the children of all staff are assisted financially by the Department of Finance and Personnel.

WALES

Gwent Health Authority

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what consultations he has had with the chairman of the Gwent health authority concerning the co-opting of his assessor onto the inquiry panel investigating the internal appointment of an external candidate to a senior management position in January; when he expects the panel to report; what arrangements he has made for reporting back to him; and if he will make a statement. [28096]

Mr. Hague: None. I have not appointed an assessor. An external adviser has been co-opted by the health authority to provide the committee of inquiry with independent and expert advice. The committee is expected to report back to the authority in early June and I shall be consulted on the outcome.

Dental Caries (Children)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what percentage of five-year-old children in Wales had dental caries in *(a)* 1990, *(b)* 1992 and *(c)* 1995; and if he will make a statement. [27419]

Mr. Richards: Every two years the British Association for the Study of Community Dentistry conducts a sample survey of dental caries prevalence in children aged five throughout Great Britain. From the results of these surveys it is estimated that the mean percentage of five-year-old children in Wales for whom there was evidence of caries experience in 1989–90 was 57 per cent. in 1991–92 it was 59 per cent. and in 1993–94, the latest year for which information is available, it was 54 per cent. Information for 1995–96 is not yet available.

Dental Services

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what proportion of the population in Wales were registered with dentists for continuing care in *(a)* 1990, *(b)* 1992, *(c)* 1993, *(d)* 1994 and *(e)* 1995 in the age groups (i) 18 to 64 years, (ii) 65 to 74 years and (iii) 75 years and more; and if he will make a statement. [27437]

Mr. Richards: New arrangements for the registration of patients with general dental practitioners were introduced at the end of 1990. However, as it took some time for patients to register, meaningful data were not available until 1991. The available data, collected by the Dental Practice Board, are given in the following table:

Percentage of people registered at the end of September

Year	*Age groups*		
	18–64	*65–74*	*75+*
1991	44.4	29.6	18.8
1992	62.7	42.1	30.0
1993	62.3	42.2	29.7
1994	61.4	42.2	30.1
1995[1]	58.6	39.6	29.8

[1] 1994 population data (the latest available) have been used to calculate these figures.

Schools (Road Safety Programmes)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will publish for each education authority in Wales and for Wales as a whole, the number of *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary schools operating road safety programmes in each of the last three years; and what is the proportion represented by such schools of the total number of (i) primary and (ii) secondary schools. [27429]

Mr. Richards: The information requested is not collected centrally.

University Colleges

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to visit Welsh university colleges in the next 12 months; and if he will make a statement. [27939]

Mr. Hague: I will be visiting University College of North Wales Bangor on 8 May and University of Wales Aberystwyth on 31 May 1996. I hope to visit other higher education institutions during the course of the next year.

Employees' Rights

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) what provision is available to employees of executive agencies under the control of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case; [27607]

(2) what provision is available to employees of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [27606]

Mr. Hague: All staff of the Welsh Office and its executive agency Cadw are entitled to statutory provision. In addition maternity leave exceeds statutory provision by two weeks and there is an entitlement for paternity leave of two days. Staff are also eligible to apply for special leave with pay and without pay for a number of specified reasons including caring responsibilities. Places at a work place nursery are available to staff. Requests from staff wishing to work patterns other than full-time conditioned hours are considered sympathetically with regard to the operational requirements of the Department.

Special Protection Areas

Ms Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he proposes to complete the designation of the Ramsey Island, St. David's Coast, Strumble Head proposed special protection area and the Carmarthen Bay candidate special protection area. [27839]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: Consultation is taking place regarding the proposed classification of Ramsey and St. David's coast as a special protection area. Strumble head is not being proposed for such classification and our

additional bird counts are needed to assess whether Carmarthen bay qualifies for consideration as a special protection area.

Myalgic Encephalomyelitis

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what proposals he has for research into ME; what statistics he has collected on the incidence of ME; what guidelines he has issued to health authorities on the coding and classification of ME; and if he will make a statement. [28399]

Mr. Hague: The Welsh Office does not at present have any specific proposals for research into ME. The main agency through which the Government support biomedical and clinical research is the Medical Research Council. The MRC is always willing to consider and fund soundly based research proposals in competition with other applications.

There are no centrally held statistics on the incidence of ME in Wales nor has the Welsh Office issued specific guidelines to health authorities on its coding and classification.

Training and Enterprise Councils

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what information he collates on the level of financial balances on the books of each of the training and enterprise councils at their financial year-end 1995–96; and what consultations he has had with each TEC concerning the levels of those balances. [28397]

Mr. Hague: My Department receives copies of each Welsh TEC's published annual report and accounts supplemented by more detailed financial returns required under the TEC operating agreement. Information for 1995–96 is due by the end of July 1996. From 1995–96 the returns will be collated into an All-Wales account which will be audited by the National Audit Office and published. The Department discuss TEC balances on a regular basis.

Departmental Budget

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list to the nearest £1 million each category of his Department budget which was *(a)* overspent and *(b)* underspent at the end of the financial year 1995–96; and what assessment he has made of the extent of the underspend that arises from delays in capital expenditure approval. [28400]

Mr. Hague: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on Friday 22 March 1996, *Official Report* columns *357–58*. Details of the outturn for 1995–96 will be provided in the public expenditure provisional outturn White Paper which will be published in due course.

HEALTH

Health Service Dentists

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many people aged 15 to 24 years were registered with NHS dentists in *(a)* 1984, *(b)* 1989, *(c)* 1992 and *(d)* 1994 and *(e)* 1995; and if he will make a statement; [27020]

(2) how many people were registered with NHS dentists in *(a)* 1985, *(b)* 1989, *(c)* 1993 and *(d)* 1995; and if he will make a statement. [26960]

Mr. Malone: The available information is shown in the table.

Number of patients registered with General Dental Service dentists: registrations at 31 December, 1992 to 1995; all patients and patients age 15 to 24

England

	1992	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*
All patients	28,847,520	29,547,398	28,911,403	27,776,901
Patients aged 15 to 17	1,245,617	1,288,420	1,311,236	1,345,928
Patients aged 18 to 24	2,820,031	2,793,830	2,639,862	2,419,082
Patients aged 15 to 24	4,065,648	4,082,250	3,951,098	3,765,010

Notes:

These data are taken from the Dental Practice Board's quarterly counts of registrations qualifying for payment. This is the only source of registration data which is broken down by age. Children's registrations have been recorded before the effect of the lapses in registrations which occur at the end of each year.

Central formal registration was introduced in October 1990; figures for December 1984, 1985, and 1989 are not available.

The Dental Practice Board improved its systems for detecting duplicate registrations in 1994 and some 3.5 million duplicate registrations have been removed since then. This has had a significant effect on the number registered.

Source:

Dental Practice Board—quarterly count of active registrations.

GP Commissioning Groups

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps health authority managers are taking to encourage general practitioner commissioning groups. [26793]

Mr. Malone: Health authorities are well aware of the need to involve all general practitioners in purchasing decisions for their patients. This was clearly set out in EL(94)79. It is restated as a medium-term priority in the priorities and planning guidance (EL(95)68), copies of which are available in the Library.

Dental Treatment

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many patients received free dental treatment in *(a)* 1990, *(b)* 1992 and *(c)* 1994; and if he will make a statement; [26978]

(2) how many people were entitled to receive free dental treatment in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [26980]

Mr. Malone: All children are eligible for free dental treatment. Information is not available about the number of adults eligible to receive free dental treatment.

The information available about treatment provided to adults is shown in the table.

Number of courses of dental treatment administered to adults eligible for free treatment: 1990; 1992–93; 1994–95

England *Thousands*

Adults	*Six months ending September 1990*	*1992–93*	*1994–95*
Courses administered to adult patients eligible for free treatment	2,029	5,653	5,621

Information is collected in terms of courses of treatment rather than patients. This table excludes courses for which there is no patient charge, including arrest of haemorrhage, and repairs and replacements under guarantee, administered to charge payers.

Information is not available for the whole of 1990. The introduction of the new contract in October 1990 affected information flows. Data have been provided for the six months, April to September.

Since October 1990 and the introduction of the new contract, children's dental treatment has largely been paid for by capitation payments. Records of individual treatments are not collected centrally. All treatment for children is free.

Drugs Campaign

Mr. Rathbone: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what research was undertaken during the preparation of the current Health Education Authority drugs campaign; and what measurement is being made of the campaign's efficiency; [27422]

(2) how the subject drugs were chosen for inclusion in the Health Education Authority's current drug campaign. [27423]

Mr. Bowis: The Health Education Authority commissioned a survey of young people between 11 and 35 years old, which addressed prevalence, settings and attitudes to drug misuse to inform the content and tone of publicity campaigns, including what specific drugs or groups might be targeted. The summary research findings was published on 3 May. The effectiveness of the publicity campaigns will be evaluated and monitored by pre and post testing of each stage of the campaign and by further annual surveys of young people.

The drugs chosen for the Health Education Authority's current publicity campaign—ecstasy, LSD and speed—were those most commonly associated with young people and the "dance scene". The publicity campaign aims to inform both young people and parents about the health effects and risks of the drugs and is being promoted on the radio, in the youth press, and women's magazines.

Nursing Homes, Doncaster

Mr. Kevin Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many privately run and owned nursing homes are currently registered with the Doncaster health authority; and how many were registered in December 1979. [27432]

Mr. Bowis: There were 34 nursing homes registered with Doncaster district health authority in 1994–95. Information is not available centrally for years before 1993–94. All nursing homes are in the independent sector.

Mr. Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many beds in privately run and owned nursing homes registered with the Doncaster health authority there are currently in the Doncaster metropolitan borough; and how many there were in December 1979. [27431]

Mr. Bowis: There were 966 nursing home beds registered with Doncaster district health authority within the boundaries of Doncaster metropolitan district in 1994–95. This information is not available centrally for years before 1993–94. All nursing homes are in the independent sector.

Drugs (Schools)

Mr. Rathbone: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to improve distribution of up to date information about drugs to those involved in drugs misuse work in schools, social services, the Probation Service, the criminal justice system and elsewhere. [27421]

Mr. Bowis: The Department of Health has commissioned a report into the information needs of drug action teams, which will enable them to identify up-to-date information. It will also inform Department of Health work in developing an information strategy.

Drugs Helpline

Mr. Rathbone: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many callers have made use of the national drugs helpline since its launch in 1995; how the calls have been classified; what information has been supplied to callers; and what measurements have been made of the success of the helpline. [27425]

Mr. Bowis: Between 1 April 1995 and 31 March 1996, the national drugs helpline answered 192,755 calls. They are classified by whether they are interactive or non-interactive— whether advice or counselling is given—and by the profile of callers, which includes gender, age, location, ethnicity, language, misuser/non-misuser and the reason for the call.

The helpline operates a free 24 hours-a-day confidential service staffed by trained counsellors who provide callers with advice and counselling, information on drugs and solvents, and on local drug services. The helpline also distributes leaflets and literature about drugs and solvent misuse to callers on request.

The national drugs helpline is currently being evaluated by independent consultants. Their report on the Department is expected at the end of May.

The helpline number is 0800 77 66 00.

Ambulance Service

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will collate centrally information for ambulance costs per mile for each ambulance authority; and if he will make a statement. [27615]

Mr. Horam: I have no plans to do so.

Office Space

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the square footage and cost of office space rented by his Department and its agencies and the number of his Department or agencies; buildings partly or fully unoccupied together with the square footage of that unoccupied office space and its estimated rental value where available in each of the past five financial years. [27727]

Mr. Horam: From 1 April 1996, the Department of Health took on responsibility for its buildings from Property Holdings, including vacant space and the payment of rents. For 1996–97, this Department and its agencies will pay an estimated £9 million in rents on leased buildings totalling 775,000 sq ft for which it has now become responsible. Of this, 18,200 sq ft in two buildings is currently vacant at an annual rental cost of £325,000.

Prior to April 1996, the payment of rentals on leased buildings and for any vacant space were the responsibility of Property Holdings.

Blood Products

Mr. Pawsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what evidence his Department had evaluated *(a)* before and *(b)* since 1978 in respect of possible contamination of factor VIII with particular reference to non-hepatitis A and B. [27713]

Mr. Horam: In 1978, it was known that there was a non-A, non-B hepatitis virus, but it had not yet been identified as the hepatitis C virus. At the time, there was no test for it or any way of eliminating it from blood products. However, people known to be at risk carrying non-A, non-B hepatitis were not accepted as blood donors. In 1985, heat treatment was introduced with a view to inactivating viruses that were known to be transmitted by factor VIII. In 1989, hepatitis C was identified. Clinical monitoring has not shown evidence of transmission of hepatitis C by factor VIII since this time. Currently used manufacturing procedures are effective in preventing transmission of hepatitis C. Since 1991, when reliable tests first became available, all blood donations in the United Kingdom have been tested for hepatitis C. In addition, since 1993 only batches of factor VIII derived from donations, whatever their sources, which have been screened and found negative for antibody to hepatitis C virus have been allowed to be placed on the market.

Mr. Pawsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what financial help is or is planned to be available for those who suffer from hepatitis C. [27714]

Mr. Horam: A number of people have been infected with hepatitis C through blood or blood products. The Government have great sympathy with those infected with hepatitis C in this way, but, as no fault or negligence on the part of the national health service has been established, we have no plans to make special payments.

HIV/AIDS

Mr. Chris Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment his Department has made of the advantage of voluntary sector participation in Government-funded targeted HIV and AIDS health promotion work. [27873]

Mr. Horam: The Government's HIV/AIDS health promotion strategy[1], published in November 1995, recognises that targeted HIV health promotion work for vulnerable groups, such as gay men, may often be better undertaken by community-based and self help voluntary groups than by the Government or their agencies. We are therefore exploring the scope for greater voluntary sector involvement with targeted campaigns.

[1]"HIV & AIDS Health Promotion: An Evolving Strategy", a copy of which is in the Library.

Emergency Ambulance Calls

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many emergency ambulance calls have been made within the city of Newcastle upon Tyne in each of the last three years. [27945]

Mr. Horam: This is a matter for Northumbria ambulance service national health service trust. The hon. Member may wish to contact the chairman, Mrs. Beryl Balls, for details.

Spinal Injuries (Research)

Mr. Alfred Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what study his Department has made of the progress of research *(a)* in the United Kingdom and *(b)* abroad into the use of implants to activate the muscles of people with spinal injuries; what action he will be taking to expedite such research in the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [28696]

Mr. Bowis: The Medical Research Council is funding two linked projects into the use of implants to stimulate the muscles of people with spinal injuries:

(i) Development of a multi-channel lumbo-sacral motor root stimulator implant—October 1992 to September 1995;

(ii) To explore the use of lumbar anterior root stimulator implants. Funding of £212,000 has been allocated for this two-year project, which began in October 1995.

Pressure Sores

Mr. Alfred Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent statistics his Department has collated of the incidence of pressure sores among NHS hospital patients; and if he will list them for each region at the latest date for which figures are available. [26897]

Mr. Bowis: This information is not available centrally.

Sick Children

Mr. Alfred Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance he has issued to local health authorities in respect of their obligations to sick children under the UN convention on the rights of the child. [26898]

Mr. Bowis: In 1991, a copy of the convention was sent to every health authority and national health service trust in England and Wales.

The principles of the convention were highlighted in recent guidance on children's services planning and in the draft guidance "Child Health in the Community: A Guide to Good Practice" which was issued for consultation in March 1995 and which is expected to be published shortly.

Doctors (Early Retirement)

Mr. Alfred Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will commission a study into the number of doctors taking early retirement from the NHS and the reasons for which they do so. [26899]

Mr. Malone: The Department supports cohort studies of doctors' careers by the medical careers research group at the Oxford unit of health-care epidemiology. These examine career patterns and wastage in the medical profession and the reasons why doctors leave the national health service.

The future programme of work will include a survey of the earliest cohort of doctors, who graduated in 1974. Most of these doctors are now in their mid to late 40s—some are older—so that, over the next few years, the studies will provide information on early retirements as well as a picture of the doctors' retirement intentions.

Employees' Rights

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what provision is available to employees of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case; [27580]

(2) what provision is available to employees of executive agencies under the control of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [27581]

Mr. Horam: Provisions on all the above are made available for staff in the Department and its executive agencies. Eligibility criteria rate set out in the conditions of service manual. Line managers are encouraged to deal with individual cases sympathetically, where criteria include discretion and business need.

Electro-convulsive Therapy

Ms Church: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into the long-term effects of the use of ECT, with particular reference to children. [28050]

Mr. Bowis: The main agency through which the Government support bio-medical and clinical research is the Medical Research Council, which receives its grant-in aid from the office of my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade. There has been a considerable volume of research of the efficacy of electro-convulsive therapy for different patient groups and this research has confirmed that ECT is a very effective treatment of some clinical conditions, and has made it clear which conditions are best treated by ECT. An unpublished survey in 1992 by the child and adolescent section of the Royal College of Psychiatrists recorded that ECT was used very rarely on those under the age of 18 and only where patients were very ill indeed. Such a low rate of treatment means that conducting any controlled trials would be impossible.

Ms Church: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what *(a)* information and *(b)* statistics his Department compiles on the use of ECT (i) in psychiatric hospitals and (ii) on children. [28049]

Mr. Bowis: Information on the number of administrations of electro-convulsive therapy is not available centrally.

Blood Giving

Mr. Hall: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures have been introduced in the last year to ensure potential blood donors can be informed of blood giving sessions in their area. [27974]

Mr. Horam: This is a matter for the National Blood Authority, which is working towards the implementation of the targets for improved services to blood donors outlined in the interim donor's charter issued last November. Regular donors are notified of their local donor sessions some two weeks in advance. A range of measures is used to publicise donor sessions, including local posters and media advertising.

Mental Health (Re-admissions)

Ms Lynne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate *(a)* the number of people re-admitted to hospital and *(b)* the expenditure on such hospital re-admissions due to mental illness each year since 1990–91. [28070]

Mr. Bowis: The information is not available centrally.

Health Service (Devon and Cornwall)

Mr. Hicks: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the membership of the regional health authority and all district health authorities and NHS trusts that provide health services in Devon and Cornwall indicating when the existing periods of appointment of members and non-executive directors expire. [28051]

Mr. Bowis: Regional health authorities were dissolved with effect from 31 March 1996. District health authorities and family health services authorities were replaced by new health authorities on 1 April. Details of the membership of health authorities and national health service trusts in Devon and Cornwall are given in the table.

Cornwall

		Appointed to
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly health authority		
Chairman:	Dr. Stan Dennison	31 March 1998
Non-Executives:	Mrs. Catherine Blight	31 March 1999
	Lady Holborow	31 March 1999
	Dr. Edward Ferrett	31 March 1999
	Mrs. Margaret Horrell	31 March 1998
	Mr. Peter Sandry	31 March 1998
Cornwall Healthcare NHS trust		
Chairman:	Mr. John Askham	31 October 1996
Non-Executives:	Lady Banham	31 October 1997
	Mr. Michael Eldred	31 October 1996
	Mr. Ian Hope	31 October 1997
	Mrs. Suzie Ladbroke	31 October 1997
	Mrs. Sheila Taylor	31 October 1997
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Learning Disabilities NHS trust		
Chairman:	The Rev'd Trevor McCabe	30 November 1996
Non-Executives:	Mr. Andrew Bell	30 November 1996
	Mrs. Katherine Hardie	30 November 1996
	Mrs. Fay Hunt	30 November 1996
	Mr. Robert Stephens	30 November 1997
Royal Cornwall Hospital NHS trust		
Chairman:	Mr. John Williams	30 November 1997
Non-Executives:	Mr. Edward Latham	30 November 1997
	Mr. Gilbert McCabe	30 November 1997
	Mr. Colin Micklewright	30 November 1996
	Mrs. Doreen Henderson	30 November 1997
	Mr. Anthony Hill	30 November 1997
Westcountry Ambulance Services NHS trust		
Chairman:	Mr. James Pease-Watkin	31 October 1996
Non-Executives:	Mrs. Hilary Bucklar	31 October 1996
	Mr. Patrick Egan	31 October 1996
	Lt. Col. Robert Perkins	31 October 1996
	Mr. Julian Luttrell	31 October 1997

Devon

		Appointed to
South and West Devon health authority		
Chairman:	Mrs. Judy Leverton	31 March 1998
Non-Executives:	Mr. Peter Cliff	31 March 1999
	Mrs. Jean Jarvis	31 March 1998
	The Reverend Peter Jones	31 March 1998
	Mrs. Agnes Gwen MacPherson	31 March 1999
	Mr. John Turner	31 March 1999
North and East Devon health authority		
Chairman:	Mrs. Ro Day	31 March 1998
Non-Executives:	Mr. Colin Bennett	31 March 1999
	Mrs. Mary Hollingworth	31 March 1999
	Mr. Ronald Hughes	31 March 1998
	Mrs. Jane Moore	31 March 1998
	Mr. Michael Walker	31 March 1999
Exeter and District Community Health Services NHS trust		
Chairman:	Mrs. Sylvia Russell	30 November 1997
Non-Executives:	Mr. Adrian Acton	30 November 1997
	Mrs. Ann Halse	30 November 1996
	Professor Arthur Roy	30 November 1997
	Miss Margaret Stokes	30 November 1997
	Mr. Michael J. Dommaille	30 November 1997

Devon

		Appointed to
Northern Devon Healthcare NHS trust		
Chairman:	Mr. Alan Eastwood	30 November 1997
Non-Executives:	Mrs. Elizabeth Burton	30 November 1996
	Dr. Alun Edwards	30 November 1996
	Mrs. Jill Farwell	30 November 1997
	Mr. Brian Greenslade	30 November 1997
	Mr. Stephen Pearce	30 November 1996
Plymouth Community Services NHS trust		
Chairman:	Vacancy	
Non-Executives:	Mrs. Gloria Beeching	30 November 1997
	Mr. Eric Distin	30 November 1997
	Mrs. Ida Miles	30 November 1997
	Mr. John Nicholas	30 November 1997
	Miss Candy Rai	31 May 1996
Plymouth Hospitals NHS trust		
Chairman:	Sir Vernon Seccombe	31 October 1997
Non-Executives:	Mrs. Sally Greenhalgh	31 October 1998
	Mr. Jeremy Ramsden	31 October 1996
	Mr. Peter Seldon	31 October 1997
	Mrs. Sylvia Ackerley	31 October 1997
	Professor Roger Bull	31 October 1997
Royal Devon and Exeter Healthcare NHS trust		
Chairman:	Dr. Ruth Hawker	31 October 1997
Non-Executives:	Mr. Henry Ball	31 October 1997
	Mr. Derek Lamb	31 October 1996
	Mrs. Anne Mayes	31 October 1996
	Ms Eleanor Tranah	31 October 1997
	Mr. James Wendover	31 October 1998
South Devon Healthcare NHS trust		
Chairman:	Mr. Anthony Boyce	30 November 1996
Non-Executives:	Mr. Michael Dobson	30 November 1997
	Mr. Michael Hawkins	30 November 1997
	Mr. Kenneth Holmes	30 November 1996
	Mrs. Patricia Wootten	31 October 1997
	Mr. Mark Galley	30 November 1997

National Register for Carers, Assessors and Verifiers

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what help his Department is giving to the national register for carers, assessors and verifiers. [28171]

Mr. Bowis: None. We shall, however, be publishing a consultation paper on ensuring adequate standards of competence for social services personnel.

Licensing Authority

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 2 April, *Official Report*, column *186*, if he will list all legal actions taken against the Licensing Authority in 1995. [28433]

Mr. Malone: Judicial review proceedings were instigated against the licensing authority by Generics (UK) Limited in 1995 on two occasions.

Medicines Commission and Committees Regulations

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health on what occasions the Medicines Commission and Committees Regulations 1970 have been revised; and which regulations are still in force. [28434]

Mr. Malone: These regulations have not been revised and are still in force.

Mr. Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which chairmen of the Medicines Commission have been appointed for a period in excess of that provided in the Medicines Commission and Committees Regulations 1970; and what effect breaches of the regulations have on the validity of the commission's advice. [28435]

Mr. Malone: There have been no appointments for a period in excess of that provided in the regulations.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Colliery Tips

Mr. Batiste: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will list by county the colliery tips still remaining in the ownership of British Coal; and what is his policy for *(a)* disposing of them and *(b)* their environmental restoration. [27641]

Mr. Page: These are matters for British Coal.

Energy Efficiency

Mr. Battle: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what summary of responses he has received from the Office of Gas Regulation to its recent consultation exercise regarding the continuation of the E factor criteria to encourage investment in energy efficiency; and if he will list those organisation which responded *(a)* positively and *(b)* negatively to the continuation of the E factor with the new price control mechanism. [27943]

Mr. Eggar: The gas supply price control review, which includes the future of E factor funding beyond March 1997, is a matter for Ofgas.

British Energy

Mrs. Beckett: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans he has to provide a dividend dowry for British Energy after privatisation. [28131]

Mr. Lang: I have no plans to provide a dividend dowry for British Energy post privatisation.

Mrs. Beckett: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans he has to structure the finances of British Energy to create a special dividend reserve. [28141]

Mr. Lang: I have no plans to create a special dividend reserve for British Energy. Like any other company British Energy will pay dividends out of its distributable reserves using its own cash resources.

Mrs. Beckett: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will list the liabilities that will follow the assets upon privatisation of the nuclear industry; and if he will make a statement. [28130]

Mr. Lang: The details of the liabilities that will be taken by British Energy into the private sector at flotation will be given in the prospectus.

Employees' Rights

Ms Jowell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what provision is available to employees of executive agencies under the control of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [27599]

Mr. John M. Taylor: The chief executives of DTI executive agencies will respond direct to the hon. Member.

Letter from P. R. S. Hartnock to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 7 May 1996:

I am replying for the Patent Office to your Parliamentary Question on various aspects of the terms and conditions of employment for Patent Office employees.

The answers to the points you raise are set out below:-

(a)&(b) Maternity Leave/Pay - The Patent Office offers its permanent staff, who have more than one year's service and who intend to return to work after their maternity leave, the right to apply to take up to 52 weeks maternity leave. This comprises 14 weeks paid maternity leave at full rate of pay and up to 38 weeks unpaid maternity leave. Casual staff and staff with less than one year's service are entitled to the usual statutory provision.

(c) Paternity Leave - Fathers may take up to 2 days paid paternity leave at the time of the birth of their child or during the weeks following the birth. The Patent Office line managers are allowed to give up to five days special leave to fathers, where there are difficulties at the confinement or to care for other young children in the family.

(d) Parental Leave - The Patent Office has no formal parental leave. Line managers are encouraged to understand the problems facing staff who are balancing their work and child care commitments.

(e) Flexible Working Hours - The Patent Office offers a Flexible Working Hours scheme to all staff at Senior Examiner level and below, whether employed on a full time or part time basis.

(f) & (g) Part-time Work/Job Sharing - Any member of the Patent Office may apply to work part-time or to job share.

(h) Leave to Care for Sick Children - Parents may apply for up to 5 days special paid leave to nurse a sick child.

(i) Homeworking - The Patent Office currently has one member of staff on a pilot scheme to examine the feasibility of homeworking.

(j)&(k) Term-Time Contracts/Annual Hours Contracts - The Patent Office does not use such contracts but staff may apply to take unpaid special leave during school holidays.

(l) Workplace Nurseries - The Patent Office offers a limited number of nursery places to staff in an on site nursery, which is run by another Government Agency. The Office also runs school holiday playschemes.

(m) Child care Allowances - The Patent Office will reimburse staff for any additional child care costs as a result of a temporary change to their working routine.

(n) Carers Leave - The Patent Office allows staff to apply for up to 5 days paid special leave to nurse a sick relative or dependent. Carers may also apply for a career break.

(o) Career Break Scheme - The Patent Office offers permanent staff, who have a satisfactory performance marking and attendance record, the right to apply for a career break of up to 5 years to assume homecare responsibilities for a dependent.

Maternity leave/pay and paternity leave are entitlements. Apart from the nursery and playscheme places, which are available on a first come first served basis, the other provisions are discretionary and subject on a case by case basis to the agreements of line managers.

Letter from Seton Bennett to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 7 May 1996:

The President of the Board of Trade has asked me to provide additional information on behalf of the National Weights and Measures Laboratory in reply to your question about the availability fo various schemes and facilities to staff in DTI.

The provisions here at the National Weights and Measures Laboratory are for the most part the same as for employees in the rest of DTI. Where practical staff can work flexible working hours and this Agency operates a nursery jointly with the two other Laboratories here on the Teddington site.

Letter from Peter Joyce to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 7 May 1996:

The President of the Board of Trade has asked me to reply to your question about the provisions available to employees in The Insolvency Service Executive Agency for maternity leave and pay and other parental/carer responsibilities.

Mr. Taylor, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, has replied to you, on behalf of the President of the Board of Trade, with regard to employees within the DTI. Provisions within The Insolvency Service are the same as the DTI's for the following parts of your question: (a)–(d); (f)–(h); (m)–(o). The answers to the remaining parts of your question are:

(e) *Flexible Working Hours*—The Service operates a flexible working hours scheme.

(i), (j) and (k) *Homeworking/Term-Time Contracts/Annual Hours Contracts*—Several employees within the Service are homeworkers. Staff may apply to use a number of the alternative working patterns. Staff may apply to take unpaid special leave during school holidays.

(l) *Workplace Nurseries*—The Service does not operate any workplace nurseries.

Maternity leave/pay and paternity leave are entitlements. The other provisions are discretionary within the operational requirements of The Service, and subject on a case by case basis to the agreement of line managers and personnel management.

Letter from Jim Norton to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 7 May 1996:

Question: To ask the President of the Board of Trade, what provision is available to employees of executive agencies under the control of his Department for (a) maternity leave, (b) maternity pay, (c) paternity leave, (d) parental leave, (e) flexible working hours, (f) part-time work, (g) job sharing, (h) leave to care for sick children, (i) home-working, (j) term-time contracts, (k) annual hours contracts, (l) workplace nurseries, (m) childcare allowances, (n) carers' leave and (o) career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case.

I have been asked to answer the questions you raise on behalf of the Radiocommunications Agency.

(a) and (b) maternity leave/pay—Permanent staff with more than one year's service and who intend to return to work after their maternity leave are entitled to apply to take up to 52 weeks maternity leave comprising 14 weeks paid maternity leave at full rate of pay and up to 38 weeks unpaid maternity leave. Casual staff and staff with less than one year's service are entitled to the usual statutory provision.

(c) Paternity leave—Fathers may take up to 2 days paid paternity leave at the time of the birth of their child or during the weeks following the birth. Line Mangers may allow up to five days paid special leave to fathers where there are difficulties at the confinement or to care for other young children in the family.

(d) Parental leave—The Agency has no formal parental leave. Line Managers are encouraged to understand the problems facing staff who are balancing their work and child care commitments.

(e) Flexible working hours—There is a flexible working hours scheme which applies to staff in the Agency's Headquarters.

(f) and (g) Part-time work, job sharing—Any member of staff may apply to work part-time or to job share. This is subject on a case by case basis to the agreement of line managers.

(h) Need to care for sick children—Parents may apply for up to five days special paid leave to nurse a sick child.

(i) Homeworking—There are arrangements for staff within the Radio Investigation Service to work from home. Applications are judged against three criteria, a) that the Officer lives within his or her defined area of work and b) that the officer's average travelling time to the nearest Agency office from his or her home is greater than one hour and c) more than half of the offices normal work is within 15 miles of his or her home address.

(j) and (k) Term-time contracts, Annual Hours contracts—There are no staff on such contracts within the Agency.

(l) Workplace nursery—The Agency does not operate a workplace nursery. Staff can apply for places at a school holiday playscheme run by DTI in Central London.

(m) Childcare allowances—Staff may apply for reimbursement of additional childcare costs incurred as a result of a temporary change to their working routine.

(n) Carer's leave—Staff may apply for up to five days paid special leave to nurse a sick relative or dependant. Carers may also apply for a career break.

(o) Career break scheme—Permanent staff who have a satisfactory performance marking and attendance record may apply for a career break of up to five years to resume home care responsibilities for a dependant.

Maternity leave pay and Paternity leave are an entitlement. The other provisions are discretionary and subject, on a case by case basis, to the agreement of Agency line management.

Letter from John S. Holden to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 7 May 1996:

You recently asked the President of the Board of Trade for information about various aspects of the personnel provisions for his department. I am replying as Chief Executive of Companies House, and give this Agency's details below. The sub-paragraphs reflect the labelling in your PQ.

(a) & (b) Maternity Leave/Pay: Permanent staff with more than 1 year's service and who intend to return to work after their maternity leave, are entitled to apply to take up to 52 weeks' maternity leave. This comprises 14 weeks paid maternity leave at full rate of pay and up to 38 weeks unpaid maternity leave. Casual staff and staff with less than 1 year's service are entitled to the usual statutory provision.

(c) Paternity Leave: Fathers may take up to 2 days paid paternity leave at the time of the birth of their child or during the weeks following the birth. Line managers may allow up to five days paid special leave to fathers where there are difficulties at the confinement or to care for other young children in the family.

(d) Parental Leave: Companies House has no formal parental leave. Line managers are encouraged to understand the problems facing staff who are balancing their work and child care commitments.

(e) Flexible Workings Hours: Companies House offers a flexible working hours scheme to all full-time staff. Depending on the operational needs of the section, some part-time staff may also participate in the scheme.

(f) & (g) Part-time Work/Job Sharing: Any member of staff may apply to work part-time or to job share.

(h) Leave to Care for Sick Children: Parents may apply for up to 5 days special paid leave to nurse a sick child.

(i), (j) & (k) Home Working/Term Time Contracts/Annual Hours Contracts: Companies House does not operate home working/term time contracts/ annual contracts on a formal basis. However, managers use their discretion to allow staff to work from home during a domestic crises situation where operationally possible. Staff may apply to take unpaid special leave during school holidays.

(l) Workplace Nurseries: Companies House does not operate any workplace nurseries. However, it buys into a school holiday playscheme in Cardiff and is considering offering financial support to staff where they live outside Cardiff and use a registered playscheme.

(m) Child Care Allowances: Staff may apply for reimbursement of additional child care costs incurred as a result of temporary change to their working routine.

(n) Carers Leave: Staff may apply for up to 5 days paid special leave to nurse a sick relative or dependent. Carers may also apply for a career break.

(o) Career Break Schemes: Permanent staff who have a satisfactory marking and attendance record may apply for a career break of up to five years to assume home care responsibilities for a dependent.

Maternity leave/pay and paternity leave are entitlements. The other provisions are discretionary and subject, on a case by case basis, to the agreement of line managers and any other local arrangements that may be in place.

Ms Jowell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what provision is available to employees of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job-sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [27598]

Mr. John M. Taylor: The answers to the questions raised are as follows:

(a) and (b) Maternity Leave/Pay—Permanent staff with more than one year's service and who intend to return to work after their maternity leave are entitled to apply to take up to 52 weeks maternity leave, comprising 14 weeks paid maternity leave at full rate of pay and up to 38 weeks unpaid maternity leave. Casual staff with less than one year's service are entitled to the usual statutory provision.

(c) Paternity Leave—Fathers may take up to two days paid paternity leave at the time of the birth of their child or during the weeks following the birth. Line managers may allow up to five days special leave to fathers, where there are difficulties at the confinement or to care for other young children in the family.

(d) Parental Leave—The Department has no formal parental leave. Line managers are encouraged to understand the problems facing staff who are balancing their work and childcare commitments.

(e) Flexible Working Hours—Some parts of the Department operate flexible working hours schemes. Arrangements are made locally.

(f) and (g) Part time Work/Job Sharing—Any member of staff may apply to work part-time or to job share.

(h) Leave to care for sick children—Parents may apply for up to five days special paid leave to nurse a sick child.

(i), (j) and (k)—Homeworking/Term-Time Contracts/Annual Hours Contracts—A number of such working patterns are operating in the Department. Staff may apply to take unpaid special leave during school holidays.

(l) Workplace Nurseries—The Department does not operate any work place nurseries. However it runs a school holiday play scheme in central London, and supports a number of local schemes at Government office locations.

(m) Childcare Allowances—Staff may apply for reimbursement of additional child care costs incurred as a result of a temporary change to their working routine.

(n) Carers' Leave— Staff may apply for up to five days paid special leave to nurse a sick relative or dependent. Carers may also apply for a career break.

(o) Career Break Scheme—Permanent staff who have a satisfactory performance marking and attendance record may apply for a career break of up to five years to assume homecare responsibilities for a dependent.

Maternity leave/pay and paternity leave are entitlements. Apart from the play schemes for which places are available on a first come first served basis, the other provisions are discretionary and subject on a case-by-case basis to the agreement of line managers and any other local arrangements that may be in place.

Small Businesses

Mr. David Nicholson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what criteria are used to define a small business; how many people *(a)* in number and *(b)* as a percentage of the total workforce, are currently employed by small businesses in the United Kingdom so defined; how many small businesses are currently operating in the United Kingdom at the latest estimate; and what were the numbers in 1987, 1990 and 1992. [28218]

Mr. Page: There is no single definition of what constitutes a small firm. A range of definitions is used in practice according to the context in which they will apply, for example in setting boundaries for schemes targeted at small firms. For statistical purposes, a small firm is often defined as having fewer than 100 employees.

The latest estimates show 10.4 million people, 50 per cent. of the private sector work force, employed in such small firms at the end of 1993. Estimates of the numbers of small firms operating in the United Kingdom are given in the table.

Numbers of small[1] firms in the United Kingdom

Year	*Number (millions)*
1986	3.22
1988	3.66
1990	3.77
1992	3.50
1993	3.56

Note:
[1] Firms with fewer than 100 employees.
Source:
Department of Trade and Industry.

Orimulsion

Sir Cranley Onslow: To ask the President of the Board of Trade which regulatory authorities he is consulting about the proposed use of orimulsion fuel for electricity generation in Pembrokeshire; and when he expects to receive their views. [27920]

Mr. Page: The Pembrokeshire county council, the Environment Agency, the Countryside Council for Wales, the Welsh Office and the Department of Transport are being consulted. It is too early to give an indication when my right. hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade will receive their considered views as they are currently considering other associated matters.

Gas (Complaints)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President to the Board of Trade what steps he is taking to improve the

performance of British Gas as a result of complaints registered in the north-west region by the Gas Consumers Council. [28101]

Mr. Eggar: The performance of British Gas is a matter for the company. It has said in response to the Gas Consumers Council's annual report of performance in 1995 that it is working very hard to restore high levels of service.

The Government are ensuring, through the phased introduction of competition in domestic gas supply, that consumers have a choice, as they have at present in gas servicing.

Business Links

Mrs. Roche: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is his department's policy regarding bulk buying for business links. [28152]

Mr. Page: Business links, as independent companies, are fully responsible for their own purchasing arrangements including securing best value for money, taking account of all factors.

My Department is keen to encourage business links to develop collaborative bulk-buying which will secure greater value for money in their purchase of equipment and services. I therefore welcome the establishment of the business link network company which, when fully operational, will provide a range of support services to the business links including the development of purchasing arrangements of this type.

Mrs. Roche: To ask the President of the Board of Trade which business links have achieved the Investor in People standard. [28153]

Mr. Page: Business Link, Teesside achieved recognition as an Investor in People on the 22 April 1996. Other business links, such as Lincolnshire, operate as divisions of training and enterprise councils and are therefore part of the existing recognition of the TEC. As a requirement of the business links accreditation process, all business links must become recognised Investors in People within three years of opening.

Loan Guarantee Scheme

Mrs. Roche: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many catering firms *(a)* in total and *(b)* in each parliamentary constituency will be excluded from applying for a loan under the loan guarantee scheme as of 1 September. [28177]

Mr. Page: Given that eligibility for the loan guarantee scheme depends on factors other than the business sector it is not possible to determine how many catering firms will be excluded.

British Coal Enterprises

Mr. Wigley: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what discussions he had with the chairman of British Coal Enterprises, prior to privatisation, with regard to maintaining the services provided by British Coal Enterprises, to small local businesses, with particular reference to loans at advantageous interest rates; and if he will make a statement. [27947]

Mr. Page: My Department has had regular contact with British Coal about the privatisation of its British Coal Enterprises subsidiary. Throughout the sales process, British Coal has made clear that it would be considering proposals for BCE in the light of its statutory duties and the importance of ensuring the continuation of effective assistance to coalfield communities. I understand that the purchasers of BCE's business funding activities are committed to a programme of continued investment in the coalfields.

Medicines

Mr. Wigley: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what representations he has received concerning the effects of ending resale price maintenance on non-prescription medicines, and the effect this will have on small pharmacy businesses; and if he will make a statement. [27949]

Mr. John M. Taylor: The Secretary of State has no statutory role or discretion in relation to the review being undertaken by the Office of Fair Trading. Representations sent to me have been forwarded to the Director General of Fair Trading.

Mining

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many deep mines were in production in *(a)* England, *(b)* Wales, *(c)* Scotland and *(d)* the United Kingdom as a whole, in each year since 1982; and if he will make a statement. [27440]

Mr. Page: The number of British Coal deep mines was as follows:

	England	*Wales*	*Scotland*	*United Kingdom*
End March 1983	143	35	13	191
End March 1984	131	30	9	170
End March 1985	n/a	n/a	9	169
End March 1986	105	19	9	133
End March 1987	89	15	6	110
End March 1988	78	12	4	94
End March 1989	74	10	2	86
End March 1990	66	6	1	73
End March 1991	59	5	1	65
End March 1992	45	4	1	50
End March 1993	45	4	1	50
End March 1994	n/a	2	n/a	17
End December 1994	n/a	n/a	n/a	16

Note:
n/a = not available.
Source:
British Coal and Digest of Welsh Statistics.

At the end of 1995 there were a total of 32 large deep mines in operation in the private sector.

Privatisation

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Board of Trade for what reasons Her Majesty's Government placed on the market in separate tranches shares in BT and BP. [27335]

Mr. Lang: Decisions on privatisation offer structures, including the amount of particular shareholdings offered for sale at particular times, take account of issues such as the size of the company being sold and market conditions at the time of each sale.

Asylum and Immigration Bill

Mrs. Roche: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what representations his Department made to the Home Department regarding the extra work imposed on small firms by the Asylum and Immigration Bill. [28151]

Mr. John M. Taylor: Officials from my Department have been in touch with those from the Home Office about various aspects of the Bill during the normal course of business.

Particle Physicists and Astronomers

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what representations he has received from Sir Arnold Wolfendale about the provision of money for particle physicists and astronomers; and if he will make a statement. [27560]

Mr. Ian Taylor *[holding answer 2 May 1996]:* I have received a letter from Sir Arnold Wolfendale arguing for extra funds to support particle physics. In the current financial year the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council has been allocated an additional £10 million, over and above the £8 million allocated last year, to protect its budget from the increase in the sterling cost of its CERN and ESA subscriptions arising from exchange rate and national income movements. Funding priorities between particular areas of research within its remit are quite rightly for the PPARC.

Coal Mining (Safety)

Mr. Battle: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans he has to increase the powers of the mines inspectorate so that owners who fail to produce a valid certificate of insurance will have their licence to work a mine withdrawn. [27295]

Sir Paul Beresford: I have been asked to reply.

I have no such plans. However, failure to produce a valid certificate of insurance can lead to prosecution.

Mr. Battle: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what are the latest figures for the major injury rate per 100,000 manshifts in the United Kingdom coal mining industry for the year beginning 1 April 1996. [27298]

Sir Paul Beresford: I have been asked to reply.

This information is not available.

Mr. Battle: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many notices have been served on private mine owners by the mines inspectorate because of their failure to produce a valid certificate of insurance. [27296]

Sir Paul Beresford: I have been asked to reply.

None.

OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION

Trade Unions

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what financial or other assistance the Overseas Development Agency provides to trade unions in developing countries in Africa; [27960]

(2) what financial or other assistance the Overseas Development Agency provides to trade unions in developing countries in Latin America; [27961]

(3) what financial or other assistance she provides to trade unions in developing countries in Asia. [28026]

Mr. Hanley: Under the British aid programme, over £1 million has been committed since 1987 through the joint funding scheme for the development of trade unions. Of this £434,000 was spent in Africa, £263,000 in Asia and £355,000 in the Caribbean. In addition, £200,000 a year has been available since 1995 through the workers' development scheme for projects to promote employee working conditions in developing countries. None of these funds have been committed in Latin America.

Aid

Sir Peter Emery: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the level of overseas development aid given by each member state of the European Union as a percentage of the gross domestic product for each of the last three years; and what is the European Union average. [27956]

Mr. Hanley: Figures for the percentage of GDP spent on official development assistance by EU member states on a financial year basis are not available. Figures for net ODA expenditure as a percentage of gross national product for these countries in 1992–94 are as follows:

Percentage of GNP

	1992	*1993*	*1994*
Austria	0.30	0.30	0.33
Belgium	0.39	0.39	0.32
Denmark	1.02	1.03	1.03
Finland	0.64	0.45	0.31
France	0.63	0.63	0.64
Germany	0.38	0.36	0.34
Greece	0.07	0.07	0.11
Ireland	0.16	0.20	0.25
Italy	0.34	0.31	0.27
Luxembourg	0.26	0.35	0.40
Netherlands	0.86	0.82	0.76
Portugal	0.36	0.29	0.35
Spain	0.27	0.28	0.28
Sweden	1.03	0.99	0.96
United Kingdom	0.31	0.31	0.31
European Union Average	0.45	0.44	0.42

Notes:
[1] Usual measure is ODA as percentage of GNP, not GDP.
[2] 1994 is the most recent year for which data is available.
[3] Greece is not a member of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee but has a small aid programme US$82 million in 1994).
Source:
OECD/DAC chairman's report 1995.

TRANSPORT

Aviation Standards, Jamaica

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the Civil Aviation Authority has made of Jamaica's adherence to aviation standards set down by the International Civil Aviation Organisation. [26750]

Mr. Norris: None. However, the Civil Aviation Authority has a contract to advise the Jamaican Civil Aviation Department on matters relating to airworthiness and flight operations standards.

Aircraft Inspections

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many inspections have been undertaken by *(a)* the Civil Aviation Authority and *(b)* his Department into aircraft leased by aircraft operators in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [26908]

Mr. Norris: The Civil Aviation Authority does not believe that additional safety checks are necessary on aircraft leased between UK operators. Wet leases of non-UK registered aircraft by UK operators are permitted only in order to meet temporary needs. If necessary, and requested by the UK operator, the CAA may carry out an audit of the lessor airline to confirm its safety standards.

Merchant Navy Uniform

Mr. Wilson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to amend the law on the wearing of Merchant Navy uniform; and if he will make a statement. [27114]

Mr. Norris: There are no plans to amend the law on the wearing of Merchant Navy uniform.

British Rail Route Structure

Mr. Austin Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what is his estimate of the cost of the backlog on the British Rail route structure. [27817]

Mr. Watts: Railtrack's asset maintenance plan for track and route structures, developed with the assistance of independent consultants W. S. Atkins, forecasts the expenditure required over the 10-year period from 1 April 1994 for sustaining the operating capacity of the assets in accordance with Railtrack's operational policies and standards and to comply with its statutory obligations. The plan also takes into account the longer-term maintenance requirements of the assets.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what part British Rail maintenance experts played in estimating the costs of maintenance of the route structure for the Railtrack Pathfinder prospectus. [27813]

Mr. Watts: Railtrack developed its asset maintenance plan for track and route structures with the assistance of independent consultants W. S. Atkins. I understand that the preparation of the plan included making extensive inquiries of experts in the rail industry, and that this included a number of past and present employees of British Rail.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will set out the forward projections of maintenance costs made over the last 10 years by British Rail. [27814]

Mr. Watts: This information could be produced only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport why the maintenance figure for the Railtrack route structure for the 10 years after flotation given in the Pathfinder prospectus is the same as expenditure by British Rail in its last 10 years. [27790]

Mr. Watts *[holding answer 2 May 1996]:* It is to be expected that the costs of maintenance of railway structures will be similar over time, given the long asset lives of the categories of asset concerned, which are preserved by ongoing maintenance and partial renewal and are rarely replaced in their entirety. Railtrack's asset maintenance plan for track and route structures, prepared with the assistance of W. S. Atkins, forecasts the expenditure considered to be necessary to sustain the operating capability of the relevant assets in accordance with Railtrack's operational policies and standards.

Fuel Rebate Duty

Mr. Wilson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the sums paid by his Department in each of the past five years in fuel rebate duty to *(a)* British Bus plc, *(b)* First Bus plc and *(c)* Stagecoach Holdings plc and its subsidiaries. [27612]

Mr. Norris: It would not be appropriate for the Government to disclose this information, which is regarded as commercially confidential, about private sector bus operators.

UK Fleet (Aid)

Mr. Peter Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what assessment he has made of the advantages of giving financial aid to the United Kingdom fleet to encourage the employment of British ratings. [27613]

Mr. Norris: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave on 1 April, *Official Report*, column *32* to the hon. Member for South Antrim (Mr. Forsythe).

London Underground (Power Cut)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what were the conclusions of the quantified risk assessment undertaken in respect of the power failure on London underground on 6 April in respect of potential loss of life; [27811]

(2) what analysis had been conducted of the local power cables shortly before the power failure on London underground on 6 April; what was the estimated residual working life on those cables at that date; and what actions he plans to prevent a recurrence of the incident. [27812]

Mr. Norris: A report into the electrical failure on the London underground on 6 April will be placed in the Library once the investigation has been completed and a report for publication has been approved by London Underground Ltd.

Railtrack (Loans)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport for what purpose the loans of *(a)* £75 million on 5 March 1993, reference 2343E, *(b)* £100 million on 19 March 1993, reference 2344E, *(c)* £75 million on 25 March 1993, reference 2345E, *(d)* £100 million on 2 April 1993, reference 2346E, *(e)* £75 million on 19 April 1993, reference 2347E, *(f)* £75 million on 30 April 1993, reference 2348E, *(g)* £50 million on 2 July 1993, reference 2349E, *(h)* £50 million on 8 January 1993, reference 2342E and *(i)* £100 million on 29 May 1992, reference 2336E were made to the British Railways Board and then transferred to Railtrack; and for what reasons they are now to be written off under the Railways Act 1993 (Extinguishment of Loans) (Railtrack plc) Order 1996. [28106]

Mr. Watts: The loans listed were made for the purposes of section 19(2) of the Transport Act 1962 and transferred by a transfer scheme made for the purposes of section 85(3) of the Railways Act 1993. Liability for the loans was extinguished so that, in the private sector, Railtrack will have a capital structure—debt and equity—appropriate to give the best overall value to the Government and the taxpayer, and to enable Railtrack to finance the programme of expenditure outlined in its network management statement.

Mr. Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what value of loans was incurred by the British Railways Board and transferred to Railtrack and written off by the Railways Act 1993 (Extinguishment of Relevant Loans) (Railtrack plc) Order 1996; what value of Government stock Railtrack has been or will be obliged to buy to offset these loans; and if he will make a statement. [28105]

Mr. Watts: The sum of the liabilities extinguished by the Railways Act 1993 (Extinguishment of Relevant Loans) (Railtrack plc) Order 1996 is £1,229,418,952.18. The loans in question were all made to the British Railways Board and transferred to Railtrack. On 29 March 1996, Railtrack issued three debentures to Her Majesty's Government acknowledging indebtedness in the principal amount of £589 million.

Rail Bridges and Tunnels

Mr. Austin Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will estimate the life expectancy of existing rail bridges and tunnels. [27936]

Mr. Watts: Railtrack's route structures are preserved by ongoing maintenance and are rarely replaced in their entirety. Railtrack inspects its bridges and tunnels on a cyclical basis and maintains them as long as can be economically justified. Maintenance includes the replacement of component parts of the structure so that the life span of the entire structure is extended. Many bridges and tunnels dating from the very earliest days of railways in this country and abroad continue to give satisfactory service.

Railway Maintenance

Mr. Austin Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what allowance was made in calculation of the costs of maintenance of the rail structure by W. S. Atkins for the backlog of inspections on maintenance left undone by British Rail. [27918]

Mr. Watts: Railtrack's asset maintenance plan for track and route structures, prepared with the assistance of W. S. Atkins, forecasts the expenditure considered to be necessary to sustain the operating capability of the relevant assets in accordance with Railtrack's operational policies and standards.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) if he will make a statement on the relevance of Bayesian probability theory to the maintenance costs of the rail structures, with particular reference to the allowance made in such analyses for the age of the asset and its condition; and what assessment he has made of the comparative value of *(a)* Bayesian analysis of cost estimates and *(b)* estimates based on inspection of the assets; [27935]

(2) what the estimated costs of maintenance of the rail structure were in the W. S. Atkin's report before and after refining by Bayesian probability theory. [27934]

Mr. Watts: Bayesian probability theory is an established modelling technique relevant to determining estimates of maintenance expenditure for rail and other structures. Independent expert consultants, W. S. Atkins, employed by railtrack to assist in the development of its asset maintenance plan—AMP—for track and route structures, used Bayesian statistical techniques in its analysis of data on the condition of certain assets, gained from sample surveys. The estimates in the Atkins report were derived from Bayesian analysis throughout for those assets to which it was applied.

Second Severn Crossing

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) for what reasons the opening of the second Severn crossing will not take place until after the official opening ceremony; [27951]

(2) if he will arrange for the second Severn crossing to be open to traffic before the official opening ceremony. [27952]

Mr. Watts: I have asked the chief executive of the Highways Agency to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Lawrie Haynes to Mr. Paul Flynn, dated 7 May 1996:

The Secretary of State for Transport has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions about the opening of the Second Severn Crossing.

The bridge cannot be opened to traffic until construction has been completed and the permit to use has been issued. This will be issued shortly before the official opening ceremony.

We intend to open the road to traffic as soon as is safely possible after the ceremony.

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what provision he will make for traffic diversions to circumnavigate the M49 pending its completion when the second Severn crossing opens. [228401]

Mr. Watts: I have asked the chief executive of the Highways Agency to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Lawrie Haynes to Mr. Rhodri Morgan, dated 7 May 1996:

The Secretary of State for Transport has asked me to reply to your recent question asking what arrangements are being made for traffic pending the completion of the new M49.

Traffic will continue to use the existing M5 to Junction 18 (Almondsbury) and the M4 until the M49, which will join the M5 (Junction 18) to the Second Severn Crossing at Pilning, is opened.

Northern Line

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what discussions he has had with London Transport underground services, regarding the developments that are to take place on the Northern line, to ensure that there will be adequate alternative means of transport pending completion of the work; and if he will make a statement. [27962]

Mr. Norris: I have discussed with London Transport on several occasions the temporary closures on the Northern line to facilitate essential engineering works, including the alternative transport arrangements it is making.

Road Development (Greater London)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the present approved and funded major road developments for the Greater London area. [27959]

Mr. Norris: The national trunk road schemes currently under construction in London area listed in table 2 of "Managing the trunk road programme", published by HMSO in November 1995. A copy of this publication can be found in the House of Commons Library.

The major local authority schemes currently under construction in London area are as follows:

Thamesmead Spine road (phase 4)

A110 Nags Head road/ High street

A206 Woolwich road improvement

Wealdston by-pass

A409 Sheepcot road

A402D Uxbridge town centre

Hounslow town centre

East Ham town centre by-pass

Strateford Gyratory modifications.

Driving Tests

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what is the present waiting time for driving tests in *(a)* Greater Manchester and *(b)* London; how many examiners have been moved on a temporary basis from Manchester to London; and for what reasons. [27958]

Mr. Norris: The average waiting time for a car test in Greater Manchester is currently 12 weeks. In Greater London, it is 16 weeks. During the period from 1 January to 28 June, 10 examiners have been, or are to be, transferred temporarily from Manchester to London for a total of 64 man weeks. The Driving Standards Agency regularly monitors waiting times to ensure that they do not vary radically between major conurbations in Great Britain. For example, if all examiners currently attached to London returned to their home centres, it is estimated that the waiting time in the capital would rise to 20 weeks.

MV Derbyshire

Mr. Loyden: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport for what reasons his Department has declined to form a formal partnership with the technical advisers to the Derbyshire Families Association. [28161]

Mr. Norris: We are considering the Derbyshire Family Association's—DFA—written request, received on 30 April, that the Department should form a formal partnership with the technical advisers to the DFA. When considering the DFA's request, we will have regard to a number of issues, including the reasons for mounting the return expedition and the position of other parties with a legitimate interest in the return.

Mr. Loyden: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what estimate he has made of the cost of engaging technical experts to take part in the second survey of the MV Derbyshire wreckage field. [28162]

Mr. Norris: The independent technical assessors appointed to oversee the return expedition have to undertake a range of tasks including the planning and supervision of the return, assessment of the data obtained on site and completion of their report for submission to Ministers and the European Commission. The cost of engaging the assessors will depend on the amount of work they will have to do, including the time needed to assess and report on the data collected. No accurate assessment of the likely costs can yet be made.

"Transport: The Way Ahead"

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what was the cost to his Department of the consultation of "Transport: The Way Ahead." [28027]

Sir George Young: For the costs of compiling, publishing and distributing "Transport: The Way Ahead", I refer the hon. Lady to the reply my right hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Dr. Mawhinney) gave to the hon. Member for Derbyshire North-East (Mr. Barnes) on 22 June 1995, *Official Report*, column *360*.

The further costs of Ministers and officials attending seminars and discussions, and analysing responses, cannot be separated from the running costs of the Department.

Employees' Rights

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what provision is available to employees of executive agencies under the control of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [27597]

Mr. Norris: Each of the Department's executive agencies has delegated authority in all areas cited.

I have asked the chief executives of the agencies to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from R. M. Bradley to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 7 May 1996:

I am responding on behalf of the Marine Safety Agency to your question to the Secretary of State for Transport about provision for maternity leave etc:

(a) Maternity Leave: There is provision for a total of 52 weeks paid and unpaid maternity leave provided that no more than 41 weeks are taken after the date of birth.

(b) Maternity Pay: There is provision for 18 weeks paid maternity leave—3 months 1 week at full pay and 4 weeks at the lower rate of statutory maternity pay.

(c) Paternity Leave: 2 days automatically—but up to 5 days if individual circumstances merit.

(d) Parental Leave: No specific provision—but up to 5 days may be granted to cover "urgent domestic distress".

(e) Flexible Working Hours: Available in all MSA offices.

(f) Part-Time Work: Requests are considered on an individual basis. There have been very few so far, and we have been able to meet the requests.

(g) Job Sharing: We have received no requests to date. If any are received, they will be considered on an individual basis and will be met if it is possible to do so.

(h) Leave Care for Sick Children: No specific provision—but see (d) above.

(i) Home-working: No provision.

(j) Term-Time Contracts: No provision.

(k) Annual Hours Contracts: No provision.

(l) Workplace Nurseries: No provision.

(m) Childcare Allowances: No provision.

(n) Carers' Leave: No provision.

(m) Career Breaks: Up to 5 years. To date, requests have been few, and all have been met.

All cases are treated individually and are assessed according to their own merits.

Letter from Derek Harvey to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 7 May 1996:

A copy of your question to the Secretary of State for Transport about certain conditions applicable to staff in the executive agencies within the Department of Transport has been passed to me so that I may answer you directly about the situation in VCA.

The VCA Framework Document does allow VCA delegated authority in all of the areas mentioned, however, the current position is as follows.

The provisions available to employees in VCA for (a) maternity leave, (b) maternity pay, (c) paternity leave, (d) parental leave, (g) job sharing, (h) leave care for sick children, (i) home-working, (j) term-time contracts, (k) annual hours contracts, (l) workplace nurseries, (m) childcare allowances, (n) carer's leave and (o) career break schemes and the criteria used to judge eligibility in each case are the same as those applied in the Central Transport Group (CTG) of the Department, with one exception. In the case of (e) flexible working hours VCA have retained the old level of the maximum hours to be carried forward, whereas CTG now allow an additional 4 hours and 12 minutes to be carried forward.

I hope this is helpful.

Letter from B. L. Herdan to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 7 May 1996:

I have been asked by the Secretary of State for Transport to reply directly to your Parliamentary Question, number PQ1905/95/96, which is for answer on 7 May 1996.

The Driving Standards Agency's delegated authority is to determine its policies in all the areas cited in your question, although in practice it currently follows the appropriate principles as set out in the Department of Transport's Staff Handbook.

There are fixed criteria for maternity leave and pay and flexible working hours arrangements.

Those other circumstances mentioned which involve types of leave, whether paid or unpaid, are not considered as automatic entitlements but as discretionary concessions. Applications are treated sympathetically, with consideration given to the needs of the Agency and whether the application is necessary and justified.

In relation to the provision of variable working patterns, namely part-time work, job sharing, home-working, term-time contracts and annual hours contracts, the Agency either already makes them available to, or is prepared to consider adopting them for, its employees.

Although the Agency does not at present provide workplace nurseries it will consider requests for financial assistance to operate them, or the granting of an allowance towards the funding of an individual employees proposed childcare arrangements during school holidays.

Letter from Ron Oliver to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 7 May 1996:

The Secretary of State for Transport has asked me to respond to your question on what provision is available to employees of executive agencies under the control of his Department for (a) maternity leave, (b) maternity pay, (c) paternity leave, (d) parental leave, (e) flexible working hours, (f) part-time work, (g) job sharing, (h) leave care for sick children, (i) home-working, (j) term-time contracts, (k) annual hours contracts, (l) workplace nurseries, (m) childcare allowances, (n) carers' leave, and (o) career break schemes, and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case.

Further to Mr. Norris's Written Answer today, the information for the Vehicle Inspectorate is as follows:

(a) *Maternity leave*—minimum 18 weeks, maximum 52 weeks, dependent on length of service.

(b) *Maternity pay*—staff with at least one year's service may receive 3 months and one week's (or 14 weeks, if greater) full pay, followed by up to a further 4 weeks' Statutory Maternity Pay. Other staff will receive any statutory payments as appropriate.

(c) *Paternity leave*—2 days entitlement, with up to a further 3 days at the discretion of line managers.

(d) *Parental leave*—paid and unpaid special leave is available to staff who have adoption and fostering responsibilities, the number of days allowed by management depending on the circumstances of each case.

(e) *Flexible working hours*—the Inspectorate operates schemes for this, available to all staff employed in its Headquarters offices in Bristol and Swansea, and in its Legal and Prosecution Services Office in Cambridge. Customer service requirements preclude this, however, at Heavy Goods Vehicle Testing Stations and Road Transport Enforcement offices, where flexible working patterns are more prevalent (see below).

(f) *Part-time work* and (g) *Job sharing*—the Inspectorate encourages flexible working patterns wherever possible. About 13% of our workforce are either part-time, or job share.

(g) *Leave to care for sick children*—line managers may approve up to 5 days paid special leave for this. Beyond this, unpaid special leave can also be granted.

(h) *Homeworking, Term-time contracts* and *Annual hours contracts*—these arrangements are all available to Inspectorate staff, and requests are considered sympathetically against the exigencies of our business needs.

(i) *Workplace nurseries*—the Inspectorate makes no provision for these.

(j) *Childcare allowances*—the Inspectorate re-imburses staff for any additional childcare costs they might incur as a result of official business, attending training courses, etc.

(k) *Carers' leave*—staff may apply for up to 5 days special leave, with pay, to care for a sick relative. Unpaid leave can also be granted for longer term care and domestic responsibilities.

(l) *Career breaks*—up to 5 years special leave, without pay, can be granted for child-rearing, and full-time study. Requests are considered sympathetically, but approval is subject to the business needs of the Inspectorate, and the practicability of holding a post open for the intended period of absence.

Letter from Dr. S. J. Ford to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 7 May 1996:

As DVLA's Chief Executive I have been asked by the Secretary of State for Transport to write to you directly with the details in answer to your Parliamentary Question on a range of employee provisions.

For ease of reference I have set out the details in the attached table.

By way of background, you may wish to know that DVLA currently employs some 4,460 staff. Retention of trained, experienced staff helps to ensure that the Agency delivers a professional and efficient service to our customers. Initiatives and conditions which enable staff to combine their work and domestic responsibilities help to reduce loss of expertise. The Agency was named Employer of the Year by the Working Parents Association in 1994 in recognition of its development of family friendly initiatives and provision of support facilities.

I hope that this is helpful.

Subject	*Available yes/no*	*Current provision*	*Eligibility criteria*
(a) Maternity leave	Yes	18 weeks maternity leave.	Available to all pregnant employees regardless of length of service or weekly hours of work. 3 weeks notice required.
		Unpaid leave available after paid leave ends up to 52 weeks in total.	Available to staff who qualify for the 14 weeks paid maternity leave (see *(b)* below).
(b) Maternity pay	Yes	14 weeks maternity pay plus 4 weeks Statutory Maternity Pay where appropriate.	Completion of 1 years paid service immediately prior to start of maternity leave.
(c) Paternity leave	Yes	2–5 days paid leave.	Available to all fathers of new born children. Length of leave dependent on circumstances surrounding the birth, number of children in family and availability of after care support.
(d) Parental leave	Yes	Special leave without pay available for staff who are unable to arrange for the care of their children during school holidays.Subject to individual circumstances, the demands of the work and holiday arrangements.	
(e) Flexible working hours [FWH]	Yes	FWH system allows staff considerable flexibility in attendance. Staff must attend work at certain (core) times of the day but can start and finish work each day within flexible bands.	Most staff with a few exceptions e.g. Security Officers. Scheme operates to fit in with business needs.
(f) Part time working	Yes	Since 1976 a wide range of working patterns have been on offer e.g. mid-day working to suite school hours, 2–5 days a week etc. Current 891 individuals are working part time, including staff working a job share pattern (See *(g)* below).	Available to all staff subject to operational requirements.
(g) Job sharing	Yes	Available since 1983.	Available to all staff subject to operational requirements.
(h) Leave to care for sick children	Yes	Up to 3 days special leave available for staff to cope with a short term crisis. Further unpaid leave may also be approved after initial period of paid leave.Available to all parents/guardians. Amount of time allowed dependent upon individual circumstances of each application.	
(i) Homeworking	No	Not applicable	Not applicable
(j) Term time contracts	No	Not Applicable	Not Applicable
(k) Annual hours contracts	No	In 1991 DVLA introduced Permanent Part year Appointments [PPYA]. Staff work first 2 weeks of month for 9 peak months of the year and at other times when required.Subject to operational requirements.	

Subject	Available yes/no	Current provision	Eligibility criteria
(l) Workplace nursery	Yes	Opened June 1990 at Agency's Swansea HQ. Caters for children from 3 months–5 years. A holiday playscheme for children aged 4–12 years is also available at the Swansea site during the main school holidays.	Child places are offered on a first come first served bases. Current fees are £65–68 per week.
(m) Child care allowances	Yes	Since 1994 DVLA staff can apply for reimbursement for reasonable and unavoidable additional child care expenses.To cover expenses incurred because of official duties in excess of normal working week.	
(n) Carers leave	Yes	3 days paid special leave available to help staff cope with a short term domestic crisis. It may be supplemented with a period of unpaid special leave.A working carers group which meets monthly was established at Swansea in 1993 to support staff who have additional responsibilities caring for elderly or disabled dependants.All staff are eligible to apply and managers are expected to exercise discretion in deciding the merits of individual cases.	
(o) Career breaks	No	Between 1988 and 1994 the Agency offered a Career Break Scheme. This had to be suspended because of difficulty in finding jobs for those who wanted to return at a time of staff surpluses. Reintroduction of the scheme is currently under consideration.	Dependent on satisfactory attendance, work performance and conduct.

Letter from Lawrie Haynes to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 7 May 1996:

The Secretary of State for Transport has asked me to reply to your recent question concerning the flexible working arrangements for employees of Department of Transport executive agencies. The table at Annex A shows the provisions available for Highways Agency employees. We are currently carrying out a survey which includes questions on flexible working patterns so that we can ascertain demand in the Agency and shape our response accordingly.

Provisions for HA staff are as follows:	Provisions
(a) Maternity leave	Statutory paid and non-paid leave are available together with up to 5 years unpaid child rearing leave.
(b) Maternity pay	Statutory Maternity Pay is available.
(c) Paternity leave	Fathers may take up to 5 days paternity leave.
(d) Parental leave	Line management have discretion to allow staff up to 5 days continuous paid leave to care for children should domestic arrangements break down. Up to 20 days leave is available for an adoptive mother or father.
(e) Flexible working hours	Staff may opt to work flexible working hours.
(f) Part-time work[1]	Staff may opt to work part-time. In practice it may take a while to find a part-time post to suit the individual.
(g) Job sharing[1]	Staff may opt to job share. In practice it may take a while to find a job share partner to suit the post.
(h) Leave to care for sick children	Line management have discretion to allow staff up to 5 days continuous paid leave to are for sick children. This may be repeated at line management discretion. We would also allow long-term unpaid leave if requested although we could not guarantee a job at the time they wished to return to work.
(i) Homeworking[1]	We currently have one person who works from home and we will consider other cases on their merits. We are also considering whether to run a pilot scheme.
(j) Term-time contracts[1]	We are in the process of assessing the demand for this type of flexible working pattern.
(k) Annual hours contracts	We do not offer this flexible working pattern but would consider it on request.
(l) Workplace nurseries	We do not have workplace nurseries.
(m) Childcare allowances	Some funding is available for holiday playschemes and we expect to be able to meet about 50 per cent. of the costs for the Agency (either via the individual or direct to a playscheme) this year.
(n) Carers' leave[1]	Line management have discretion to allow staff up to 5 days continuous paid leave to care for children or elderly or sick relatives should domestic arrangements break down. Staff may also take unpaid leave. In practice, we could not guarantee that a job would be available after a long absence, at the time they wish to return to work.
(o) Career break schemes[1]	Staff may take up to 1 year's career break eg to travel or improve their education. In practice, we cannot guarantee that a job would be available at the time they wish to return to work.

[1] We are currently building up a database of staff interested in part-time, job sharing and other flexible working patterns so that we can assess the need and respond appropriately.

Letter from C. J. Harris to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 7 May 1996:

The Secretary of State for Transport has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about Maternity leave.

The Coastguard Agency has not varied the terms and conditions of employment set out in the Department of Transport Staff Handbook. Copies of which are available to all staff.

Details on specific areas are covered in the annex attached.

Maternity Leave

The rules with regards Maternity leave vary depending on the contract the member of staff has with the Agency and the length of their reckonable service.

A member of staff with over a years service is entitled to a maximum of 18 weeks paid Maternity leave and a maximum of 34 weeks unpaid leave. However an employee may only take a maximum of 41 weeks leave, paid and unpaid, after the date of birth.

For staff with over 26 weeks reckonable service but under a year the maximum length of time changes to 18 weeks paid Maternity leave and 22 weeks unpaid leave of which a maximum of 29 weeks can be taken after the birth.

Staff with less than 26 weeks service 15 weeks before the expected week of birth are entitled to 18 weeks maternity leave, unpaid except for Maternity allowance paid for by Social Security, and a further 11 weeks unpaid.

Maternity Pay

An employee is entitled to 18 weeks paid Maternity leave, of which a maximum of 11 can be taken before the birth. This is available if the employee concerned is in paid service at the time the Maternity leave begins, they are not employed on a casual basis, they are not on a fixed term appointment of less than 2 years (unless the contract specifically allows it) and that the employee intends to return to work after the childs birth.

Paternity Leave

Fathers of a new born child are entitled to 2 days leave with pay which can be taken at the time of the birth or during the following weeks. A further 3 days leave are allowed in exceptional circumstances.

Parental Leave

A break of up to five years unpaid special leave for child rearing is available under the Agency's Career break scheme.

Flexible Working Hours

Where it is possible for flexible hours to be worked employees are given the option of working flexible or fixed hours. The scheme is open to both part and full time workers.

Part-time Working

The Agency has a number of part time workers and would consider requests from employees to convert to part time hours on a case by case basis. All new posts are advertised as being open to applicants wanting to work full, part time or job share.

Job-Sharing

The Agency does not currently employ anyone on a job share but would consider requests on their individual merits. All new posts are advertised as being open to applicants wishing to job share.

Leave Care for Sick Children

Special Leave with pay for 1–3 days (5 days in exceptional circumstances) is available for caring for a sick child.

Home-Working

The Agency does not have any officers who work on a regular basis from Home but would consider requests from staff on an individual basis.

Term Time Contracts

The Agency does not currently employee anyone on a Term Time Contract but would consider any requests on an individual basis.

Annual Hours Contracts

The Agency does not currently employee anyone on an Annual Hours Contract but would consider any requests on an individual basis.

Workplace Nurseries

The Agency does not have a workplace nursery.

Childcare Allowances

The Agency does not pay employees and Childcare allowances.

Carers' Leave

1 to 3 days special leave with pay is allowed (up to 5 days in exceptional circumstances) which is intended to enable alternative arrangements to be made. If these cannot be made in this time, special leave without pay may be applied for.

The Agency will consider every case on its merits and where felt necessary additional special leave with or without pay may be granted.

Career Break Schemes

The Agency does not operate a career break scheme, considering each application on its individual merits. The break can be for a maximum of 5 years Special unpaid leave and may be awarded for Child Rearing, Further/Higher Education etc.

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what provision is available to employees of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [27596]

Mr. Norris: The following provisions are available to staff in the central transport group of the Department of Transport:

(a) Maternity leave—minimum of 18 weeks, maximum of 52 weeks—dependent on length of service;

(b) Maternity pay—staff with at least one years' service staff may receive three months and one weeks' full pay followed by up to a further four weeks statutory maternity pay. Other staff will receive any statutory payments as appropriate;

(c) Paternity leave—fathers are entitled to two to five days at the discretion of line managers;

(d) Parental leave—in addition to maternity and paternity leave, the central transport group also offers staff up to one years' leave (mixture of paid and unpaid) for adopting a child and up to 20 days, per year, special leave to enable foster parents to attend meetings etc;

(e) Flexible working hours—central transport group operates a flexible working hours scheme which is available to staff in most areas of CTG. Staff who work part-time or who may be casual employees are not exempt from working flexible working hours;

(f) Part-time work—the central transport group aims to agree applications for part-time working where ever possible as a matter of departmental equal opportunities policy;

(g) Job sharing—where ever possible CTG will aim to agree applications from job shares;

(h) Leave to care for sick children—line managers may approve up to a maximum of five days' paid special leave may be granted to look after a sick child;

(i) Home working—the central transport group looks at each application for home working and treats as appropriate;

(j) Term time contracts—as per (i);

(k) Annual hours contract—as per (i);

(l) Workplace nurseries—the central transport group offers places to staff in its Hastings office;

(m) Child care allowance—where staff incur extra child care costs as a result of departmental business, training courses etc., the central transport group meets such costs;

(n) Carers' leave—Staff may apply for up to five days' special leave *with* pay to care for a sick relative. Special leave without pay may be approved when it is necessary for a member of staff to care for elderly or infirm relatives. Special leave without pay for up to 12 months may be granted to a member of staff who has borne heavy domestic responsibilities over a long period.

(o) Career break—long term special leave without pay, for a period not exceeding five years, is available to staff for reasons including: raising children, accompanying partners abroad, full time study.

London Underground

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he intends to publish the report of the inquiry into the power failure which occurred on the London underground on 6 April; and if he will make a statement. [27972]

Mr. Norris: A report about the electrical failure on the London underground on 6 April will be placed in the Library once the investigation has been completed and a report for publication has been approved by London Underground Ltd. I expect that this will be by the end of this month.

Contracts

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list all contracts awarded by his Department to *(a)* Trafalgar House plc, *(b)* BICC plc, *(c)* HSBC Holdings plc and *(d)* the General Electric Company plc indicating the date the contract was awarded, its duration, its purpose and the total value of the contracts for each year since 1980. [27970]

Mr. Norris: None.

Transport in London

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what was the cost to his Department of *(a)* organising and *(b)* publishing the results of his consultation on transport in London. [27971]

Mr. Norris: The production of the document "A Transport Strategy for London" cost the Government office for London a total of £18,748. An estimate of the costs of staff time of the officials in the Government office and the Department of Transport who worked on the document would be available only at disproportionate cost.

Pedestrians and Cyclists

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what proportion of all journeys under two miles were made *(a)* by bicycle and *(b)* by foot, in the UK in each year since 1979; [28215]

(2) what proportion of all journeys were made by *(a)* bicycle and *(b)* foot in the UK in each year from 1979. [28214]

Mr. Norris: Figures for journeys are available only for Great Britain and for particular years. They are given in the table.

	Percentage of journeys under 2 miles by bicycle	*Percentage of journeys under 2 miles by foot*	*Percentage of all journeys by bicycle*	*Percentage of all journeys by foot*
1975–76	4.5	67.3	3.3	35.3
1985–86	3.3	64.4	2.4	34.2
1989–91	2.7	61.1	1.9	30.1
1992–94	2.3	60.6	1.7	29.1

SCOTLAND

Serco Ltd.

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what contracts his Department and his agencies have with Serco Ltd.; what is the current cost; when each contract ends; what are the penalties involved should he seek early termination of the contract; and if he will make a statement. [26685]

Lord James Douglas Hamilton; The Scottish Office has the following contracts with Serco Ltd.:

(i) the provision of facilities management services at Victoria quay, Edinburgh at a cost of approximately £1.6 million over five years. The contract will expire on 18 September 2000 but it contains provision for up to two one-year extensions, making the latest possible contract end date 18 September 2002. The Department is entitled to terminate the contract at any time without penalty upon giving six months' notice in writing.

(ii) the installation and maintenance of traffic information and control systems across the monitoring network in the central belt of Scotland at a total cost of £18 million. The contract was awarded in October 1993, the contract length being two years six months and a three-year maintenance period thereafter which will end in April 1999. Should the department decide to halt the installation there would be no penalties; merely an obligation to meet any costs outstanding or imputed.

(iii) the maintenance of the Scottish Office electrical and electronic equipment throughout the road network at a cost of £180,000 per annum. The contract will expire in April 1997. The department is entitled to terminate the contract at any time without penalty upon giving 12 months' notice in writing.

Multiple Births

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many sets of *(a)* twins, *(b)* triplets, *(c)* quadruplets, *(d)* quintuplets and *(e)* sextuplets were born in Scotland in each year since 1990; and if he will make a statement. [27415]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The information is as follows:

Type of birth	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*
Twins						
2 live	711	682	790	751	762	780
1 live, 1 stillbirth	15	22	11	25	13	30
2 stillbirth	5	5	6	4	3	5
Triplets						
3 live	14	18	15	10	16	27
2 live, 1 stillbirth	2	4	—	—	—	1
1 live, 2 stillbirth	—	2	—	—	—	1

Type of birth	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	[1]1995
Quadruplets						
4 live	1	1	—	—	—	1
3 live, 1 stillbirth	—	1	—	—	1	—
Quintuplets	—	—	—	—	—	—
Sextuplets	—	—	—	—	—	—

[1] Provisional.

Dental Caries (Children)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what percentage of the five-year-old children in Scotland had dental caries in *(a)* 1990, *(b)* 1992 and *(c)* 1995; and if he will make a statement. [27403]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: A standardised survey on randomly selected samples of children aged five across Scotland found that the mean percentage of five-year-old children for whom there is evidence of caries experience was 59.2 per cent. in 1989–90 and 58.2 per cent. in 1991–92. Figures for 1995–96 are not yet available.

Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what was the basis for his statements of 22 April, *Scottish Grand Committee, Official Report*, column 10, and *Official Report*, column 36; and what response he has had from the European Commission in respect of this matter. [27661]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson *[holding answer 2 May 1996]:* Since the onset of BSE, we have followed the best available scientific advice from the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee and introduced strict controls for the protection of public health. The World Health Organisation has endorsed our actions. All of this is on record. However, despite this independent scientific endorsement of the safety of British beef, the European Commission placed a complete ban on all beef-related exports to any part of the world. It has not offered any scientific justification for this and Commissioner Fischler has publicly stated:

"I would not hesitate to eat beef in England. I see no medical reason not to."

There is therefore no alternative valid interpretation to that offered by my right hon. Friend on 22 April.

Wind Farms

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what written objections he has received to proposals to develop wind farms at West Garty and Gartymore, Sutherland; and if he will make a statement. [27893]

Mr. Kynoch: My right hon. Friend has received a total of 355 letters about proposals to develop wind farms at West Garty and Gartymore, Sutherland. Of these, 10 support the proposal, with 345 opposed to the development. Those in favour cite the positive aspects of green energy whereas those against argue on grounds of environmental impact, noise, visual intrusion and concerns about restoration.

ENVIRONMENT

EU Directives

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list the directives which have affected his Department in each of the past three years and *(a)* the United Kingdom legislation introduced as a result of the directives, *(b)* the United Kingdom legislation which goes beyond the minimum standards set out in the directives, and *(c)* the clauses within each piece of United Kingdom legislation which amplify the minimum standards set out in the directives. [27084]

Mr. Clappison *[holding answer 29 April 1996]:* The directives which have affected my Department in each of the past three years and the main UK legislation or measures introduced by my Department as a result are shown in the following table. *(b)* and *(c)* cannot be answered without incurring disproportionate cost.

Directive	Main UK legislation or measure
1993–94	
87/217/EEC—Prevention of Environmental Pollution by Asbestos	Direction to the National Rivers Authority (NRA) 1993
88/379/EEC—Dangerous Preparations—Classification, Packaging and Labelling (CPL)	The Chemical (Hazard Information and Packaging Regulations) 1993
89/178/EEC—Dangerous Preparations—CPL—1st Adaptation	The Chemicals (Hazard Information and Packaging) Regulations 1993
90/492/EEC—Dangerous Preparations—CPL—2nd Adaptation	The Chemicals (Hazard Information and Packaging) Regulations 1993
90/517/EEC—Dangerous Substances—CPL—11th Adaptation	The Chemicals (Hazard Information and Packaging) Regulations 1993
90/641/Euratom—Ionizing Radiation	The Ionizing Radiations (Outside Workers) Regulations 1993
91/155/EEC—Dangerous Preparation—Safety Data Sheets	The Chemicals (Hazard Information and Packaging) Regulations 1993
91/325/EEC—Dangerous Substances—CPL—12th Adaptation	The Chemicals (Hazard Information and Packaging) Regulations 1993
91/326/EEC—Dangerous Substances—CPL—13th Adaptation	The Chemicals (Hazard Information and Packaging) Regulations 1993
91/632/EEC—Dangerous Substances—CPL—15th Adaptation	The Chemicals (Hazard Information and Packaging) Regulations 1993
91/322/EEC—Indicative Limit Values	Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 1988 (as amended)
92/3/Euratom—Shipment of Radioactive Waste	The Transfrontier Shipment of Radioactive Waste Regulations 1993
92/32/EEC—Dangerous Substances—CPL—7th Amendment	The Chemicals (Hazard Information and Packaging) Regulations 1993; The Notification of New Substances Regulations 1993; The Chemicals (Hazard Information and Packaging for Supply) Regulations 1994
92/42/EEC—Energy Efficiency of Hot Water Boilers	The Boiler (Efficiency) Regulations 1993
92/57/EEC—Temporary or Mobile Construction Sites	Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 1994
92/69/EEC—Annex V Test Methods	Adopted as an Approved Code of Practice
92/72/EEC Ozone	The Ozone Monitoring and Information Regulations 1994

Directive	*Main UK legislation or measure*
92/72/EEC—Titanium Dioxide Waste	Direction to the NRA 1994
93/15/EEC—Placing on the Market and Supervision of Transfer of Explosives for Civil Use (POMSTER)	The Placing on the Market and Supervision of Transfer of Explosives Regulations 1993
93/67/EEC—Risk Assessment of New Substances	The Notification of New Substances Regulations 1993
93/90/EEC—Dangerous Substances—Exemptions, List of Legislation	The Notification of New Substances Regulations 1993
93/105/EEC—Dangerous Substances—TestRequirements for Polymers	The Notification of New Substances Regulations 1993
1994–95	
87/101/EEC—amending Directive 75/439/EEC on Waste Oils	The Waste Management Licencing Regulations 1994
90/679/EEC—Biological Agents	Control of Substances Hazardous to Health 1994
91/156/EEC—amending Directive 75/442/EEC on Waste	The Waste Management Licencing Regulations 1994; The Waste Management Licencing (amendment etc.) Regulations 1995; The Waste Management Regulations 1996
91/271/EEC—Urban Waste Water Treatment	The Urban Waste Water Treatment (England and Wales) Regulations 1994
91/689/EEC—Hazardous Waste (as amended by 94/31/EC)	The Special Waste Regulations 1996
92/43/EEC—Habitats	The Conservation (Natural Habitats Etc.) Regulations 1994
92/37/EEC—Dangerous Substances—CPL—16th Adaptation	The Chemicals (Hazard Information and Packaging for Supply) Regulations 1994
92/91/EEC-Extractive Industries, Boreholes	The Borehole Sites and Operations Regulations 1995; Prevention of Fire and Explosion and Emergency Response Regulations 1995; Offshore Installations and Pipeline Works Regulations 1995; Offshore Installations and Wells (Design and Construction) Regulations 1996
93/18/EEC—Dangerous Preparations—CPL—3rd Adaptation	The Chemicals (Hazard Information and Packaging for Supply) Regulations 1994
93/21/EEC Dangerous Substances—CPL—18th Adaptation	The Chemicals (Hazard Information and Packaging for Supply) Regulations 1994
93/68/EEC—amending inter alia Directive 89/106 on Construction Products	The Construction Products (amendment) Regulations 1994
93/72/EEC—Dangerous Substances—CPL—19th Adaptation	The Chemicals (Hazard Information and Packaging for Supply) Regulations 1994
93/101/EEC—Dangerous Substances—CPL—20th Adaptation	The Chemicals (Hazard Information and Packaging for Supply) Regulations 1994
93/112/EEC—Dangerous Preparations—Safety Data Sheets Amendment	The Chemicals (Hazard Information and Packaging for Supply) Regulations 1994
94/2/EC—Energy Labelling of Fridges, Freezers and their Combinations	The Energy Labelling (Refrigerators and Freezers) Regulations 1994
94/15/EC—amending Directive 90/220/EEC on the Deliberate Release of GMOs	GMO Deliberate Release Regulations 1995
94/51/EC—amending Directive 90/219/EEC on the Contained Use of GMOs	GMO Contained Use (Amendment) Regulations 1995 Amendment Regulations 1995
94/66/EEC—amending Directive 88/609/EEC on Large Combustion Plants	Direction to HMIP 1995
94/69/EEC-Dangerous Substances—CPL—21st Adaptation	The Chemicals (Hazard Information and Packaging for Supply) Amendment Regulations 1994
1995–96	
91/676/EEC—Nitrates	The Protection of Water Against Agricultural Nitrate Pollution (England and Wales) Regulations 1996
92/104/EEC—Extractive Industries, Mines and Quarries	The Quarries Miscellaneous Health and Safety Provisions Regulations 1995
92/58/EEC—Safety Signs	Health and Safety (Safety Signs and Signals) Regulations 1996
95/12/EC—Energy Labelling of Washing Machines	The Energy Information (Washing Machines) Regulations 1996
92/13/EC-Energy Labelling of Tumble Driers	The Energy Information (Tumble Driers) Regulations 1996

Local Government Reorganisation

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what percentage of England in *(a)* area and *(b)* population is currently covered by unitary local authorities; and what the figures will be when the changes arising from the proposals of the local government commission have been implemented. [27434]

Sir Paul Beresford: At present 11 per cent. of the area and 43 per cent. of the population of England are covered by unitary local authorities, including London boroughs and metropolitan districts. Once all the structural changes which the Government have accepted have been implemented the percentages will be 16 per cent. and 54 per cent. respectively.

Battersea Power Station

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what discussions are taking place, and with whom, on the future development of Battersea power station; and if he will make a statement. [27621]

Sir Paul Beresford: Discussions are continuing between Wandsworth council, English Heritage and consultants appointed by the owners on a master plan for the whole Battersea power station site. The Government would like to see the future development of this important site on the River Thames resolved as soon as possible.

Local Authorities (Out-of-court Payments)

Sir Gerard Vaughan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what is his policy in respect of out-of-court payments made by local authorities with special reference to the payment by Northumberland county council to a former employee, on the ground of stress in the performance of his job; what assessment he has made of whether such payments are a proper use of public funds; and if he will freeze this payment until it has been examined by the district auditor. [27645]

Mr. Curry: Following an award of damages by the courts against Northumberland county council, and prior to an appeal, the county council reached an out-of-court settlement with a former employee which was met by its insurers. The district auditor has no locus as regards payments met by insurers.

Refuse Tip (Attlebridge)

Mr. Garrett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will make a statement on the leaking of toxic and infected material from the refuse tip at Attlebridge in Norfolk. [27411]

Mr. Clappison *[holding answer 2 May 1996]:* Responsibility for ensuring that the site at Attlebridge in Norfolk does not harm human health nor cause pollution of the environment now rests with the Environment Agency. The site is subject to a recent planning application and in view of the appellate role of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, I cannot comment on the merits of the application.

Housing (Coventry)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how many households were on the Coventry city council housing waiting list for each year since 1990; and how many are currently on the waiting list. [27906]

Mr. Clappison: Local authorities in England report the numbers of households on their housing waiting list at 1 April each year in their annual housing investment programme—HIP—returns.

The data reported by Coventry city council for each year since 1990 are as follows:

	Number of households on the waiting list
April 1990	6,984
April 1991	6,851
April 1992	8,664
April 1993	8,917
April 1994	7,690
April 1995	6,857

Mr. Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how many new *(a)* social dwellings and *(b)* specialised social dwellings he estimates Coventry will need in (i) 1996–97 and (ii) 1997–98. [27908]

Mr. Clappison: The Department does not prepare local estimates of the need for new social housing or specialised social homes. It is for local authorities to assess local housing needs and to identify these in their housing strategies.

Employees' Rights

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what provision is available to employees of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carer's leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [27576]

Sir Paul Beresford: My Department has a range of policies designed to help staff combine their career and domestic responsibilities. Full details are included in the terms and conditions of staff and set out in the Department's "Staff Handbook" or other published guidance. In some cases eligibility is statutory or automatic and in others an element of local management discretion is involved. I will write further to the hon. Member with full details and enclose the relevant extracts from the Department's guidance.

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what provision is available to employees of executive agencies under the control of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [27577]

Sir Paul Beresford: My Department's three executive agencies, the Planning Inspectorate, the Building Research Establishment and the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre, all provide a range of policies designed to help staff combine their career and domestic responsibilities. In most cases the initiatives follow the terms and conditions adopted for my Department's employees as set out in the Department's "Staff Handbook" and other published guidance. However, there are variations to take account of local circumstances in the individual agencies. I will write further to the hon. Member with the full details of the eligibility criteria and these variations.

Advertisements (Special Control)

Ms Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment (1) how many orders for areas of special control of advertisements have been approved since 1966; [27833]

(2) how many proposed orders for areas of special control of advertisements have been rejected since 1996, and on what grounds; [27834]

(3) if he will list the *(a)* district, *(b)* borough and *(c)* national park authority areas where approved areas of special control of advertisements exist, and specify those which are (i) district, (ii) borough and (iii) park-wide in extent. [27835]

Mr. Robert B. Jones: The information is not readily available in the form requested. I am writing to the hon. Member with such information as we have.

Ms Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what is the area of land covered by approved orders for areas of special control of advertisements, given *(a)* in total and *(b)* by district. [27836]

Mr. Jones: It is estimated that approximately 50 per cent. of the land area of England and Wales is subject to area of special control of advertisements designation. The area by district is not available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Ms Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Enviornment if he will list the proposals for new orders for areas of special control of advertisements that he is currently considering. [27837]

Mr. Jones: No new orders for areas of special control of advertisements are currently before my right hon. Friend. He is currently considering modifications to existing orders in South Shropshire district council, Enfield London borough council and Vale Royal borough council.

North Sea (Protection)

Ms Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when he will publish the Government's proposals on the implementation of the ministerial declaration of the fourth international conference on the protection of the North sea. [27838]

Mr. Clappison: The Government are preparing a comprehensive United Kingdom guidance note on the implementation of the fourth North sea conference declaration, as has been the practice after previous North sea conferences. It will be published shortly.

Rural Development Areas

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list rural development areas, indicating when their boundaries last changed. [28155]

Mr. Clappison: A map of the Rural Development Commission's priority rural development areas can be found in the commission's 1995 corporate plan, a copy of which is in the House of Commons Library. The current areas are as follows:

Cambridgeshire
Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly
Cumbria
Devon
Doncaster
Dorset
Durham
East Riding of Yorkshire and North Lincolnshire (ex Humberside)
East Sussex
Essex
Gloucestershire
Hereford and Worcester
Isle of Wight
Kent
Lancashire
Lincolnshire
Norfolk
North East Derbyshire
North Yorkshire
Northumberland
Nottinghamshire
North West Leicestershire and South Derbyshire
Redcar and Cleveland (ex Cleveland)
Rotherham
Shropshire
Somerset
Staffordshire
Suffolk
West Derbyshire
West Yorkshire
Wiltshire.

The commission carried out a comprehensive review of its rural development areas during 1992–93. The current boundaries became effective on 1 April 1994.

Cetaceans (Protection)

Ms Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what action the Government plan to take to protect cetaceans from pollution and other environmental damage; and if he will make a statement. [28126]

Mr. Clappison: The Government are committed to the protection of the marine environment, and play an active role in international fora aimed of conserving cetacean numbers.

Although direct evidence of adverse effects from chemical pollution and climate change is scarce, the UK is participating in discussions, initiated by the International Whaling Commission, to consider the effects of both of these processes.

The Government have also recently played a major role in developing protocols aimed at tackling persistent air borne and land sourced organic pollutants in collaboration with the UN Economic Commission for Europe and the UN environment programme.

Rural Development Commission

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what has been the cost of the Rural Development Commission's business advisers in each year since it began. [28148]

Mr. Clappison: The Rural Development Commission regionalised its operations and set up dedicated teams of business advisers, working primarily within the commission's priority rural development areas, in 1990. Since 1995 business advisers have operated exclusively in these areas. The cost of business advisers prior to 1990 is contained within the general running costs of the commission and cannot be disaggregated. The commission's expenditure on business advisers in the years 1990–91 to 1995–96 are as follows:

	£ million
1990–91	2.80
1991–92	2.31
1992–93	2.13
1993–94	2.35
1994–95	1.82
1995–96	0.87

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what is the current value of the Rural Development Commission's small firms loan fund. [28149]

Mr. Clappison: The net book value of the commission's loan fund, after allowing for provision of unrecoverable loans, is as follows:

	£ million
At 31 March 1994	15.261
At 31 March 1995	15.306
At 31 March 1996	14.814
Estimated 31 March 1997	14.104

Local Government Finance

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when he expects to make an announcement on challenge funding of local authority capital. [27975]

Sir Paul Beresford: An announcement will be made shortly.

Housing Associations

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how many new rented homes housing associations will be able to start in 1996; and what were the figures for each of the past three years. [28071]

Mr. Clappison: Figures covering the last three years showing the number of project approvals made for new housing association rented accommodation in England areas follows:

Project approvals for rented housing: self contained and shared accommodation

	Housing Corporation HAG funded units	*Local authority HAG funded units*	*Total HAG funded units*
1993–94	43,857	19,226	63,083
1994–95	39,992	17,076	57,068
1995–96	23,792	11,394	35,186

These figures cover new rented accommodation provided through a new build and the purchase and rehabilitation of existing properties. In addition, over this period, the Housing Corporation has also approved home ownership incentive schemes which release existing social rented homes for reletting.

The Housing Corporation's approved development programme for 1996–97, which excludes local authority HAG, provides for between 21,300 and 26,100 project approvals for new rented housing in England. In addition, the Housing Corporation estimates that there will be a further 18,500 to 21,700 ADP approvals in 1996–97 including home ownership incentive schemes. Additional lettings will result from local authority support for housing associations.

Marine Pollution

Ms Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what steps the Government have taken to date to implement the United Nations environment programme's programme of action on land-based sources of marine pollution; and what further action is planned. [28122]

Mr. Clappison: I refer the hon. Member to my written reply of 25 March 1996 to the hon. Member for Ceredigion and Pembroke, North (Mr. Dafis), *Official Report*, column *535*.

Persistent Organic Pollutants

Ms Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what is the Government's policy in respect of a global ban on persistent organic pollutants. [28125]

Mr. Clappison: The United Kingdom has played a major role in developing a proposed protocol on persistent organic pollutants under the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe convention on long range transboundary air pollution. Furthermore, the Government support the United Nations environment programme initiative to build on this work to achieve a global, legally binding treaty and will play an active role.

The development of such protocols, involves the careful identification of potential persistent organic pollutants, their assessment and a consideration of the most appropriate action to take to control the identified risk. This will not always result in a total ban. In some cases, there may be an essential use of a substance which should be preserved, where safer and effective substitutes may not be available. Each substance identified as a persistent organic pollutant will have to be judged on its own merit.

Business Subsidies

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list the grants and loans provided by his Department to businesses, together with the criteria they have to meet in order to obtain the subsidy. [28182]

Sir Paul Beresford: The Department provides grants directly to businesses under the following schemes:

- Single regeneration budget challenge fund
- City challenge
- Regional enterprise grant
- Environmental technology innovation scheme (now closed to new applications)
- Small company environmental and energy management assistance scheme
- Grants under the Water Industry Act 1991 towards national security measures in the water industry
- Grants under the Industrial Development Act 1982 towards water and sewerage infrastructure in assisted areas
- Grants under the Water Industry Act 1991 towards rural water and sewerage projects.

The Department does not provide any loans directly to businesses.

There are no overarching criteria for the above grant schemes; the criteria for each scheme are dependent on it's individual aims and objectives. However, all recipients have to satisfy the Department that their application offers value for money and that there will be satisfactory controls over the funds received. Any business which would wish to apply for a grant or a loan under one of the above schemes can find out the specific criteria it would need to satisfy by contacting my Department.

The grants listed are paid directly by the Department of the Environment to businesses. In addition, the Department also funds other bodies, including local authorities and non-departmental public bodies, who will themselves support businesses through grants and loans.

Sustainable Development

Mr. Congdon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what was the outcome of the meeting of the United Kingdom round table on sustainable development held on 25 April; and if he will make a statement. [28295]

Mr. Gummer: At its 25 April meeting, the round table approved a report on defining a sustainable transport sector, which will be published shortly. It also had a preliminary discussion with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport about the Green Paper "Transport—The Way Forward" published that day. The meeting agreed to begin work on four new projects:

intermodal transport, both passenger and freight;

land use planning controls over energy developments;

water resources; and

housing and sustainability.

On 19 April, the round table published its first annual report. This describes all the work that is completed or under way.

Packaging

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how the European Community directive on packaging and packaging waste will be implemented; and if he will make a statement. [28443]

Mr. Gummer: As part of its commitment to achieve sustainable development, it is Government policy to encourage the recovery of value from waste wherever that is practicable. To this end it is desirable that more of the real environmental costs of waste production and disposal should be borne by the producers of that waste directly. This creates a stronger market incentive for companies both to reduce waste in the first place, and then to find cost effective ways of recycling or otherwise recovering unavoidable waste. The Government's objective should be to establish a policy framework within which the efficiency and innovativeness of the market can be harnessed to solve environmental problems. Producer responsibility does that; it makes the market work to the benefit of the environment.

Industries concerned with packaging—those who manufacture and use the packaging which ends up as waste, including retailers—have been particularly resourceful in their response to the challenge of producer responsibility. Eight million tonnes of packaging waste are produced each year, and in response to the Government's invitation the industry's producer responsibility group put forward its own proposals to recover and recycle 58 per cent. of United Kingdom's packaging waste by 2001. It proposed that this should be achieved through the creation of one or more industry financed and managed organisations which would invest in a variety of waste recovery projects. The prototype recovery organisation is now being established as VALPAK. However the industry made clear that these schemes would be established only if there were effective legislation to deter free riders. The Government accepted this industry view and invited comments on a range of possible legal obligations which could achieve a framework in which competing companies could operate and which would enable the Government to implement the EC directive on packaging and packaging waste.

In responding to the different options for a legal obligation, the great majority of business organisations indicated a strong belief that the primary objective of meeting the UK's recovery and recycling targets could be secured only if all the major players had an incentive to co-operate through a shared legal obligation. This would also create the most favourable conditions for formation of cross-sectoral collective industry schemes, which many businesses have indicated is their preferred approach to meeting these targets.

Further work took place to develop a form of shared approach which could both provide assurance to Government that the necessary targets would be met while also providing an acceptable basis for apportioning the obligation between the different stages of the packaging chain. Final agreement on such a basis and its supporting principles was achieved on 15 December 1995 at a meeting chaired by Sir Peter Parker and attended by 30 of the leading businesses involved.

This has not been the approach in some other EU member states. Some have proposed a packaging tax and others have legislated for a "take back" requirement upon shops and business premises to receive back from consumers all of the sales packaging around products sold. These approaches provide less flexibility for affected businesses and do little to create the new markets for recycled materials which is essential in the long term. Indeed some schemes in some other states have had a damaging impact on reprocessing and manufacturing activity in the UK and the rest of the Union and it was for that reason that industry pressed for a single market framework which we then successfully negotiated in the form of the directive.

By contrast with some of these other approaches, the UK Government place a high priority on implementing producer responsibility in a way which the UK industry itself feels can be operated effectively. This will help to minimise the burden upon individual companies, maximise their freedom to choose how to meet their targets, and thereby make our environmental objectives more readily attainable.

I am therefore announcing today that the Government have accepted the industry view that a shared legal obligation is the right way forward. I am now satisfied that this approach will enable us to meet the environmental standards which people increasingly expect industry to adopt, which our national commitment to sustainable development requires of us, and which would achieve the flexible targets which we successfully negotiated within the EU's packaging directive. In the near future I propose to publish draft regulations under the Environment Act 1995 that will give effect to 15 December agreement and to guide this process I recently asked Sir Peter Parker to chair an advisory committee comprising some of the senior business representatives most closely involved in developing producer responsibility for packaging. I am announcing separately the terms of reference, membership and initial tasks of the advisory committee and its future role in monitoring and reviewing the operation of the regulations.

In the light of the work already undertaken by the committee on implementation of the 15 December agreement, I propose to include in the draft regulations the following elements:

(i) A method of calculation of individual business or scheme obligations. Any business covered by the regulations will need to be able to work out what its recycling and recovery obligation would be, so as to decide whether to perform that

on its own or join a collective scheme. The business would need to measure the tonnage of packaging which it manufactures or fills or sells or supplies. It would then apply the following percentages which, on current data and assumptions, are consistent with the 15 December agreement.

	Per cent.
Packaging raw material manufacture	6
Conversion	11
Packing and filling	36
Retailing/supplying	47

Importers would be treated on a comparable basis.

(ii) A phased approach to meeting the targets:

an initial requirement, from 1996, for businesses or collective schemes to provide data and information to the Environment Agency;

a second stage requirement, from 1998, to provide evidence that recycling and recovery is being achieved, initially to 1998 targets and then the full directive targets in 2001.

(iii) A cut off by which businesses using less than 50 tonnes packaging a year would be exempt from the quantified legal obligation (it is estimated that 90 per cent. of businesses—which account for less than 10 per cent. of total packaging—would be below this threshold). Further consideration is being given to other means by which such businesses could help to contribute to higher levels of recycling and recovery.

This approach is intended to give businesses as much flexibility as possible, particularly in the early years, and create confidence that the targets will be achieved. In consulting on the regulations we will be seeking further business views on costs and practicality of the systems proposed so as to minimise compliance costs and limit the regulatory framework to the minimum.

The industry now needs to turn its attention to developing more detailed plans for the formation of industry-led collective exemption schemes, such as VALPAK. Such schemes will need to satisfy UK and EC competition criteria. Many, if not most, businesses will no doubt continue to feel that participation in such schemes provides the simplest and cheapest means of meeting their obligations.

The producer responsibility initiative marks important new ground in environmental policy-making and provides a remarkable example of effective Government-industry collaboration. A shared approach to our national war on waste will boost recycling across the country, foster many new ways of putting waste to work and maximise our recovery of scarce resources. A new market will be created, and the environment will be a chief beneficiary. I pay tribute to the many individuals and companies from all sectors of the packaging chain who by rising to this demanding challenge have played an important part in putting the nation on the path to sustainable development.

Housing

Mr. Raynsford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how much expenditure was incurred by *(a)* the Housing Corporation and *(b)* the local authority in relation to each of the proposals for a transfer of tenanted council housing in Torquay to another landlord since 1988; and what were the numbers and percentages of tenants voting (i) for and (ii) against each proposal. [11714]

Mr. Curry *[pursuant to his reply, 29 January, Official Report columns 578–79]:* The figure for the Housing Corporation's total grant spend on the Torbay Tenants' housing association should have been £1,869,306, less repayments of £49,074, giving a net figure of £1,820,232.

Mr. Raynsford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what has been the total cost to public funds to date of the tenants' advice scheme set up under part IV of the Housing Act 1988 with particular reference to *(a)* setting up costs incurred by his Department and the Housing Corporation, *(b)* publicity and promotional expenditure, *(c)* annual revenue expenditure incurred by the Housing Corporation in each year since 1988, *(d)* grants to tenants organisations and others and *(e)* any other expenditure. [11715]

Mr. Curry *[pursuant to his reply 29 January, Official Report column 579]:* The figure for the Housing Corporation's total grant spend in support of tenants' choice cases should have been £4,203,574, less repayments of £76,381, given a net total of £4,127,193.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Employees' Rights

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what provision is available to employees of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case; [27582]

(2) what provision is available to employees of executive agencies under the control of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-timework, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [27583]

Mr. Howard: These provisions are set out in the departmental staff handbook—a copy of which is in the Library—which details conditions of service for all Home Office employees, apart from those in the Prison Service. A staff handbook will be issued shortly for Prison Service employees. There is no written guidance on term-time or annual hours contracts, but these would be considered, subject to operational requirements, as the need arose.

Immigration Service

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much was paid to consultants Touche Ross to evaluate the immigration services staff rotas; and if he will make a statement. [27924]

Mr. Kirkhope: Fees payable to private sector consultants by the public services are treated as commercial confidential and are not normally disclosed.

Prison Staff (Convictions)

Mr. Berry: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many (i) prison governors and (ii) prison officers have convictions for *(a)* indecent assault, *(b)* other crimes against the person and *(c)* other offences; and if he will make a statement. [27448]

Miss Widdecombe *[holding answer 30 April 1996]:* Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Pearson to Mr. Roger Berry dated 7 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me to reply, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to your recent Question about prison governors and prison officers convicted of criminal offences.

Centrally held figures relate to the period since 1990. The figures set out in the table below relate to convictions over the period March 1990 to March 1996.

Staff currently serving	*Indecent assault*	*Other crimes against the person*	*Other offences*
Prison governors	1	0	1
Prison officers	0	14	108

The Prison Service takes the conviction of any of its staff for any criminal offence very seriously and can take action under its own code of conduct and discipline. Where a member of staff is found guilty of a serious offence, the normal outcome would be dismissal from the Service. Lesser offences may also, depending on the circumstances, result in dismissal or may result in other penalties such as written warnings, loss of promotion opportunities or pay.

In the cases listed, the 'other crimes against the person' are all cases of actual bodily harm. These offences largely relate to domestic disputes. 'Other offences' include first time drink/driving convictions, speeding, fishing without a licence, letting a dog worry sheep etc.

Departmental Posts (Losses)

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many posts he estimates will be lost at the Home Office during the next three financial years; from which units they will come; and if he will make a statement. [27929]

Mr. Howard: Planned staff numbers in the Home Office and its agencies are set out in annex 4 of my Department's annual report CM 3208 published in March, a copy of which is in the Library.

Permanent staff numbers are projected to fall by 1,045 between 1995–96 and 1998–99, of which 705 are in the Prison Service.

Proxy Votes

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what evidence he has assessed on the abuse of proxy votes; and if he will make a statement. [27862]

Mr. Sackville: There is no recent evidence to suggest that abuse of the proxy voting system is either systematic or widespread. Application forms relating to absent votes were amended in 1994; electors now have to indicate clearly whether they are applying to vote by post or by proxy, and all appointments of a proxy must be signed by the elector.

Doncaster Prison

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the areas where Doncaster prison has performed to a higher standard than other private prisons since it opened. [27614]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Pearson to Mr. Martin Redmond, dated 7 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question about the areas where Doncaster prison has performed to a higher standard in relation to the other contracted-out prisons.

There is no proposal to make a qualitative evaluation of Doncaster prison's performance against that of any of the other contractually-managed prisons. This is because the factors that influence performance, which include size, function and population mix, are such as to make direct comparison difficult.

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the key performance indicators for the running of Doncaster prison; and if he will list the statistics in respect of which performance indicators have been met since the prison opened. [27617]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Pearson to Mr. Martin Redmond, dated 7 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General, to reply to your recent Question about key performance indicators for the running of Doncaster prison.

Key performance indicators are specified in the contract, relating to the following areas of operation:

(1) Escapes from the prison. The contract requires that there should be no more than two by the end of the first year of operation, and no more than one in each subsequent year. There was one escape from Doncaster prison in the first year of operation, and there has been none since.

(2) Escapes from escort. The contract requires that there should be no more than eight escapes from escort in any of the first three years of the contract. There have been no escapes.

(3) Time out of cell. The requirement of a minimum 12 hours per day for prisoners on normal location has been met.

(4) Positive regimes. The contract requires the availability of at least 12 hours of regime activities, including education, for prisoners on normal location, and also the availability of at least 6 hours per week of education and training for adult prisoners, and 15 for young prisoners under 17. These targets have been achieved.

(5) Visits. The contract requirement is for the statutory minimum for visits as set out in Prison Rules. This requirement has been exceeded at Doncaster prison.

(6) Grievances. The contract requires that 90 per cent of grievances capable of resolution at prison level, be resolved within seven working days. The level achieved for the first contractual year was 95 per cent, and the level for the current contractual year is running at 100 per cent.

(7) Assaults. The contract required no more than 148 assaults on prisoners, and no more than 77 assaults on staff by the end of the first year of operation. For the second year, a level of 215 assaults has been set. The total number of assaults for the first contractual year was 221, and is projected to be 154 for the current year.

In addition to the contractual requirements, the performance of Doncaster prison is measured against the Service-wide key performance indicators. These figures are provided in the Prison Service Annual Reports.

Mr. Redmond; To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the security cameras currently operating at Doncaster prison are constantly monitored; how many officers are on duty per shift monitoring the security camera; how many security cameras are in operation at any one time; and for how long the videotape recordings made by the cameras are stored. [27618]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Pearson to Mr. Martin Redmond, dated 7 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question about whether the security cameras currently operating at Doncaster prison are constantly monitored; how many officers are on duty per shift monitoring the security cameras; how many security cameras are in operation at any one time; and for how long the videotape recordings made by the camera are stored.

The security cameras are constantly monitored and have videotape facilities. Doncaster prison holds high risk prisoners and I am sure that you will understand that to provide the remaining information which you have requested might prejudice security at the prison.

Prison Service Health Research

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the nature of all *(a)* medical and *(b)* health care research currently being undertaken within the Prison Service for each United Kingdom prison. [27616]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Brian Landers to Mr. Martin Redmond dated 7 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question about (a) medical and (b) health care research currently being undertaken within the Prison Service for each United Kingdom prison.

The Directorate of Health Care for the Prison Service in England and Wales holds a central register of medical and health care research receiving central support and approved by the independent Prison Service Health Research Ethics Committee. The attached list sets out the centrally approved and supported projects recorded on the central database as currently in progress.

Information on local studies, approved by the governor of an establishment and a recognised Research Ethics Committee, is not notified to the Directorate of Health Care in all cases and could be collected only at disproportionate cost.

The situation in Scotland and Northern Ireland is a matter for the respective Departments.

Prison Service Health Research Ethics Committee approved Medical and Health Care Research Projects receiving central funding

Assessment of the needs and best management of severely behaviourially disturbed young offenders at Aylesbury young offenders institution;

Evaluation of a pilot scheme for the contracting-our of Genito-Urinary Medicine services to the NHS by Wormwood Scrubs, Brixton and Wandsworth prisons;

Evaluation of the drugs rehabilitation programmes implemented in 22 prisons under phase 1 of the Prison Service Strategy for Drugs;

Analysis of the doctor patient relationship in the prison setting. Four sample prisons are in the process of selection;

Assessment of throughcare arrangements and needs for prisoners with a history of mental illness discharged from prison direct to the community—Yorkshire prisons;

Evaluation of a project jointly funded by the Department of Health and the MACA for development of care plans prior to release of mentally disordered prisoners—Leicestershire prisons;

A study into the effect of the application of section 48 of the Mental Health Act 1983. This involves central records without the direct involvement of establishments.

Prisons (Drugs)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the prisons in England and Wales that have been rendered free of illegal drugs following the implementation of Government policy; and if he will make a statement. [27620]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Pearson to Mr. Tom Cox, dated 7 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question about prisons in England and Wales that have been rendered free of illegal drugs following the implementation of Government policy.

Mandatory drug testing has been implemented in all prisons, on schedule, by 31 March. The data it will yield will provide, over time, a good indicator of the level and patterns of drug misuse in prisons. But, because the random testing programme involves the testing of only 10 per cent. of a prison's population each month, even when all these tests prove negative it will not be safe to claim that a prison is free of drug misuse.

Prison Service Budget

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received from the chief inspector of prisons about the planned reductions in the prison service budget; and what action he has taken in response. [27858]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked for a reply to be given.

Letter from Brian Landers to Mr. Gordon Prentice, dated 7 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question about representations from the Chief Inspector of Prisons about the planned reductions in the Prison Service budget; and what action has been taken in response.

There are regular contacts between the Chief Inspector, Home Office Ministers and the Prison Service on a wide range of issues, including cost reduction, which affect the Service as a whole and individual prison establishments. The Director General has told Sir David Ramsbotham that he has advised governors of the importance of maintaining the balance between essential security and control measures, constructive and effective regimes for prisoners and providing support for staff. The emphasis is on reducing costs and not reducing the amount of purposeful activity for prisoners; and resources should continue to be given to those programmes which help prisoners to address their offending behaviour.

Life Sentences

Mr. French: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the average time served by prisoners who have received mandatory life sentences before release on licence. [27717]

Miss Widdecombe: The available information is published in "Prison statistics, England and Wales",—table 8.5 of the 1994 edition, (Cm 3087). A copy of this publication is in the Library.

Office Space

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the square footage and cost of office space rented by his Department and its agencies and the number of his Department or agencies' buildings partly, or fully unoccupied together with the square footage of that unoccupied office space and its estimated rental value where available in each of the past five financial years. [27726]

Mr. Howard: The Home Office assumed accountability for all the offices in which it had occupations, including any vacant space therein from 1 April 1996. Prior to this date, the whole of the Government common user (office) estate—CUE—in which Government Departments were housed was owned by Property Holdings. The part of the question requesting figures for the last five financial years is, therefore, a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment.

As at 1 April 1996, the Home Office had no totally unoccupied office buildings, and only 10 with some vacant space. This vacant space amounted to 92,429 sq ft which comprised less than 1 per cent. of the total Home Office non-prison estate. The estimated annual rental cost of this vacant space is £205,000.

Special Constables

Mr. Touhig: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much money his Department spent on advertising campaigns to recruit special constables in each year from 1991–92 to 1995–96.[28204]

Mr. Howard: Expenditure by the Home Office on advertising to recruit special constables in each year from 1991–92 to 1995–96 was as follows:

Financial year	*£000*
1991–92	875
1992–93	1,060
1993–94	1,460
1994–95	2,800
1995–96	2,300

Prisoners (Education and Training)

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many hours of education and training for prisoners have been budgeted for in the Prison Service in the current financial year. [27924]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Pearson to Mrs. Anne Campbell, dated 7 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question about the number of hours of education and training budgeted for in the current financial year.

Each prison governor has a single budget for the running of the establishment. The allocation of funds will be determined by local circumstances, reflected in the business plan agreed with the area manager. Governors have been asked to report their initial spending plans for 1996–97 to the Prison Service Financial Support Section, and a preliminary forecast of the anticipated expenditure on education and training should be available towards the end of May or in early June.

Governors purchase teacher contact hours from their education provider at an agreed price per teacher contact hour. Contract prices are unique to each establishment, and the price per contract hour depends on the number of teacher contact hours ordered. There are also discount arrangements in some circumstances. It is, therefore, not possible to forecast the number of teaching hours to be ordered from the preliminary forecast of expenditure.

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners were on remand at the latest available date categorised by their alleged offences. [28109]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Brian Landers to Mr. Ian Pearson, dated 7 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question asking how many prisoners were on remand at the latest available date, categorised by their alleged offences.

Provisional information on the number of remand prisoners held in Prison Service establishments on 31 March 1996, by offence, is given in the attached table.

Population of untried and convicted unsentenced prisoners in Prison Service establishments on 31 March 1996[1]; by offence

	Number
Violence against the person	2,105
Sexual offences	514
Burglary	2,118
Robbery	1,086
Theft and handling	1,636
Fraud and forgery	188
Drugs offences	1,109
Other offences	1,578
Offence not recorded	678
All offences	11,012

[1] Figures are provisional.

Grants and Loans

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the grants and loans provided by his Department to businesses, together with the criteria they have to meet in order to obtain the subsidy. [28190]

Mr. Howard: My Department does not make grants and loans to businesses in the private sector.

Asylum and Immigration Bill (Small Firms)

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment his Department has made of the extra work that will be imposed on small firms by measures in the Asylum and Immigration Bill. [28150]

Miss Widdecombe: We do not expect that our proposals on the prevention of illegal working will affect small businesses disproportionately. We intend to keep the burden on all employers to a minimum, and will have this in mind in the preparation of guidance. The responses to our consultation document and compliance cost assessment lead us to think that the compliance costs for small business will, in the main, be minimal.

Mentally Disordered Offenders

Mr. Jacques Arnold: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will publish further details of his proposals for the sentencing and supervision of mentally disordered offenders as set out in chapter 8 of the White Paper, "Protecting the Public: the Government's Strategy on Crime in England and Wales." [28462]

Mr. Howard: I have today placed in the Library copies of a consultation document, "Mentally Disordered Offenders: Sentencing and Discharge Arrangements". The consultation period on the document lasts until 30 June 1996.

Terrorism (Video Cameras)

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he received recommendations from the City of London police to site video cameras at Stranraer, Holyhead and Fishguard, as part of security operations to counter the Provisional IRA; and what plans he has to commission video cameras at these points. [27240]

Mr. Howard *[holding answer 1 May 1996]:* Advice on the introduction of closed circuit television cameras at ports across the country has been provided by the Association of Chief Police Officers, not the city of London police. Funding and guidance on the installation of CCTV has been provided by the ACPO advisory group since June 1994, and cameras were operational at Stranraer, Holyhead and Fishguard by March 1995.

Oral Contraceptives

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 2 April, *Official Report*, column *184*, from whom the Licencing Authority received a manuscript of the transnational study before the meeting of the Committee on Safety of Medicines of 13 October 1995. [28436]

Mr. Malone: I have been asked to reply.

I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) on 19 December 1995, columns *1149* and *1153*.

Raffle Tickets

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the number of commercial companies that print and sell tickets and otherwise administer draws and raffles on behalf of registered charities. [27336]

Mr. Sproat: I have been asked to reply.

None.

Responsibility for charities and the voluntary sector was passed from my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for the Home Department to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for National Heritage on 1 May 1996.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Iran

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what has been the response of the United Kingdom and the EU to the report of the UN rapporteur on religious intolerance, Mr. Abdel Fattah Amor, on the execution of Protestant leaders in Iran; what has been the outcome to this response; and if he will make a statement. [27856]

Mr. Hanley: We welcome Mr. Amor's report. Our views on the trial of those accused of killing the three Christian pastors in Iran were set out in my reply of 4 December 1995. In the light of Mr. Amor's report and the reports of the UN special rapporteur, Mr. Hussain, and the UN special representative, Mr. Copithorne, the European Union co-sponsored a resolution critical of Iran at the UN Commission on Human Rights. The resolution, adopted on 24 April 1996, expressed concern at Iran's failure to meet international standards on the administration of justice and the lack of adequate protection for Christian minorities. We will continue to maintain pressure on Iran to do more to protect the rights of religious minorities.

Cyprus

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had, and with which bodies, on the Council of Europe Cuco report on the Turkish settlers living in occupied northern Cyprus; and if he will make a statement. [27619]

Mr. David Davis: We have had no discussions on this report since exchanging views at the Council of Europe Ministers' Deputies meetings in December 1992 and March 1993.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had, and with whom, regarding the military airfield in Turkish-occupied Cyprus at Lefkoniko; and what use is made of this airfield. [27635]

Mr. Davis: None. Lefkoniko is not a military airfield. It is a small civil airport used for one month each year when the main airport in northern Cyprus is closed for repair and renovation, or when flights are diverted.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what replies he has received from the high commissioner in Cyprus on the establishment of an Islamic fundamentalist party in the Turkish Cypriot-occupied area of northern Cyprus; and if he will make a statement. [27897]

Mr. Davis: In early December 1995, there were reports in the Turkish Cypriot press of plans to found an Islamic party. We have seen no evidence that such a party has been established.

Office Space

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the square footage and cost of office space rented by his Department and its agencies and the number of his Department or agencies' buildings partly, or fully occupied together with the square footage of that unoccupied office space and its estimated rental value where available in each of the past five financial years. [27728]

Mr. Hanley: The square footage and cost, including VAT, of rented space, by both wings of the FCO and its agencies in the United Kingdom over the last five financial year are as follows:

	Square footage	*Cost £*
1991–92	357774	9,759,695.90
1992–93	357774	9,759,695.90
1993–94	357774	10,137,292.12
1994–95	362924	9,729,174.43
1995–96	355327	9,161,664.81

The FCO also occupies Crown freehold properties. None of the leased buildings were partially or totally unoccupied during the period.

Russia

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he is making to the Russian Government about the use of the death penalty in that country. [28120]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: We have made no representation to the Russian Government about the use of the death penalty. It is an issue we continue to monitor closely.

Kashmir

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had and with whom on elections in the Indian-occupied area of Kashmir, with particular reference to *(a)* the involvement of the military forces now stationed in this area and *(b)* the quality of the candidates; and if he will make a statement. [28024]

Mr. Hanley: My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary and I have had discussions with a wide range of people, including officials, Members of Parliament and others on the various aspects of the forthcoming parliamentary elections in Jammu and Kashmir. The need to develop a genuine political process remains an important part our long-standing policy on Kashmir. Elections can contribute to that process.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the British high commissioners for India and Pakistan regarding the proposed elections to take place in Indian-controlled Kashmir; and if he will make a statement. [27946]

Mr. Hanley: Our high commissioners in New Delhi and Islamabad report regularly on developments concerning Kashmir, including the forthcoming parliamentary election. I discussed Kashmir with them during my recent visits to India and Pakistan.

British Council

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is his Department's policy concerning the British Council; and if he will make a statement. [28073]

Mr. Hanley: I refer the hon. Member to my closing statement in the Adjournment debate on the British Council in 1 May, *Official Report*, columns *1097–1102.*

Ambassadorial Posts (Women)

Mr. Fatchett: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the number of women in ambassadorial posts in *(a)* 1986, *(b)* 1991 and *(c)* on the latest available figures. [27375]

Mr. Hanley: The number of women in ambassadorial posts is as follows:

(a) 1986: 1

(b) 1991: 2

(c) 1996: 8.

Senior Departmental Posts (Women)

Mr. Fatchett: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the policies adopted by his Department in order to encourage more women into senior positions within his Department. [27376]

Mr. Hanley: We have an action programme in place to ensure equality of access to recruitment, training, career development and promotion for all women. Graduate recruitment into the fast stream is particularly targeted to help redress the under-representation of women at senior grade level, and 57 per cent. of the 1995 fast stream intake were women. We encourage the retention of women through a number of initiatives including flexible/part-time work, job sharing, career breaks of up to five years, subsidised nursery facilities and holiday play schemes for school children. The FCO has been a member of the national opportunity 2000 campaign since 1992.

Employees' Rights

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what provision is available

to employees of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [27578]

Mr. Hanley: Provisions of employees of the FCO and its executive agencies are as follows.

(a) Maternity leave and (b) Maternity pay

There are three elements:

Paid maternity leave (MATL)

Statutory maternity pay (SMP)

Unpaid maternity leave (MUPL)

Three months plus one week on full salary, in one continuous period to include the date of confinement, the criteria being that the officer:

is not employed on a casual, standby or short notice appointment, or on a fixed-term appointment of less than two years

has been employed by the civil service for at least one year and is not on extended unpaid leave immediately before maternity leave would start

intends to return to work after the confinement agrees in writing to repay payments for maternity leave if she does not return to work.

SMP

Paid for 18 weeks, although for those eligible for MATL 14 weeks of this would be offset by full pay, providing the officer is serving in the United Kingdom.

MUPL

An officer may take unpaid maternity leave subject to the total period of MATL, SMP and MUPL not exceeding 52 weeks. In addition employees can apply for further special unpaid leave up to a maximum of five years.

(c) Paternity leave

Two days to be taken at the time of confinement, or during the weeks immediately afterwards.

(d) Parental leave

Special leave with pay may be authorised to arrange an adoption and care for a newly adopted child.

(e) Flexible working hours

A flexible working hours—FWH—scheme is in operation, though not in overseas posts.

In the FCO heads of Department have discretion to operate the scheme in their Department or in sections of it. Any established or casual—minimum three months' contract—non-industrial member of staff can opt to join an operating FWH scheme.

In the Overseas Development Administration, a FWH scheme is available to all permanent UK staff.

(f) Part-time work and (g) Job sharing

Both are available to all staff serving in the UK and any requests are considered within the constraints of operational requirements.

(h) Leave to care for sick children

Up to one week's leave may be granted for the short-term care at home of sick children. For longer-term care staff can apply for up to 5 years' special unpaid leave.

(i) Home working

Home working is permitted; each application is considered individually, taking account of the reasons for the request, security implications and operational requirements.

(j) Term time contracts and (k) Annual hours contracts

No such contracts are in operation.

(l) Workplace nurseries

The FCO subsidises 10 places at a nursery run by the Westminster Children's Society for children from 6 months to 5 years. There is an on-site nursery at the FCO's Hanslope park site. The FCO and ODA use the Westminster holiday playscheme for children from five to 12 years. The ODA provides one of the sites for the holiday playscheme but does not offer nursery provision. The ODA's Scottish headquarters operates a playscheme for children aged five to 14 years.

(m) Child care allowances

In the FCO child care allowances are not paid to staff serving in the UK. For staff serving overseas there is an element in the cost of living and representational allowances to compensate for any increased childcare costs. The level of provision is calculated by an allowances inspector on the basis of local costs and the needs of the job.

In the ODA officers can claim reimbursement of additional child care expenses necessarily incurred as a result of their: attending a residential training courses; travelling for the office on a short-term visit; or attending a training course on a day on which they do not usually work.

(n) Carers' leave

Up to one week's leave may be granted for the serious illness of a relative or dependent, or for the short-term care at home of a close relative or dependent. For longer-term care staff can apply for up to five years' special unpaid leave.

(o) Career break schemes

Special unpaid leave for a maximum of five years in aggregate. Each application is considered on its merits.

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what provision is available to employees of executive agencies under the control of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [27579]

Mr. Hanley: I refer the hon. Member to my previous answer.

Turkey (Human Rights)

Mr. Anthony Coombs: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will outline the steps that he thinks the UN Commission on Human Rights should be taking to address the continuing instance of human rights violations in Turkey. [27694]

Mr. David Davis: The presidency statement at the UN Commission on Human Rights, to which we contributed, including a number of steps which we hope the Turkish Government will take to improve the human rights situation in Turkey. Agreement to fix a date for the visits by the special rapporteurs of the Commission on Human Rights is among these.

Yugoslavia (Diplomatic Relations)

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the United Kingdom's relations with the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the recent appointment of a British ambassador in Belgrade; and when he expects a Yugoslav ambassador to the UK to be in post. [27969]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: The United Kingdom recognised the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia—FRY—on 9 April 1996. We have now appointed our chargé d'affaires in Belgrade as ambassador. We expect the FRY to appoint an ambassador to the UK shortly.

Grants and Loans

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the grants and loans provided by his Department to businesses, together with the criteria they have to meet in order to obtain the subsidy. [28188]

Mr. Hanley: We have provided no grants or loans to businesses.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Foulridge Wharf Bridge

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if she will list the canal bridge at Foulridge wharf as forming part of a heritage museum site. [27170]

Mr. Sproat: My right hon. Friend has decided to accept the advice of English Heritage, her statutory advisers on listing matters, that this bridge is not of special architectural or historic interest and she will not therefore be adding it to the statutory list.

Lottery Funding (Southwark)

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if she will list the projects within the London borough of Southwark that have received funding from each of the national lottery funds. [27426]

Mr. Sproat: To date, 19 awards totalling £63.6 million have been made to projects within the London borough of Southwark. The information is contained in the following table:

Body	*Announced*	*Recipient*	*Amount*
Arts	21 September 1995	William Penn Steel Band	29,357.00
Arts	16 October 1995	Shakespeare's Globe Trust	12,400,000.00
Arts	23 November 1995	Opera Factory	41,470.00
Arts	6 February 1996	Bankside Gallery Ltd.	17,000.00
Arts	6 February 1996	Strathcona Theatre Company	44,059.00
Arts	11 April 1996	Method and Madness	411,375.00
MC	30 October 1995	Tate Gallery of Modern Art	50,000,000.00
NLCB	19 December 1995	12th Camberwell Scouts	27,406.00
NLCB	19 December 1995	Arnott Road Pre-School Nursery	800.00
NLCB	19 December 1995	Bird in the Bush Community Centre	21,414.00
NLCB	19 December 1995	Dachwyng Supplementary School	12,000.00
NLCB	19 December 1995	Downtown Community Project	30,000.00
NLCB	19 December 1995	Edward Henry Housing Co-op	4,500.00
NLCB	19 December 1995	Elephant Jobs Charity	57,850.00
NLCB	19 December 1995	Pelican Estate Tenants and Residents Association	5,000.00
NLCB	19 December 1995	Southwark Victim Support scheme	25,500.00
NLCB	19 December 1995	The Lorrimore	172,000.00
NLCB	19 December 1995	The Southwark Branch of Arthritis Care	3,000.00
Sports	6 December 1995	London Borough of Southwark	350,000.00
Totals	(19 awards)		63,652,731.00

Greenwich Millennium Exhibition

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage how much national lottery funding has been allocated to the Greenwich millennium exhibition project by each of the funds. [27428]

Mr. Sproat: The Millennium Commission has announced, in principle, a commitment of up to £200 million in lottery grant to the exhibition; the remaining capital and operating cost will be raised from other sources.

Office Space

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if he will list the space footage and cost of office space rented by her Department and its agencies and the number of her Department or agencies' buildings partly, or fully unoccupied together with the square footage of that unoccupied office space and its estimated rental value where available in each of the past five financial years. [27733]

Mr. Sproat: My Department and its agencies fully occupy 97,670 sq ft. of office square on which we will pay £520,857 in respect of service charges for the year 1996–97. The rents paid for Government offices are a commercial in confidence matter between the Government and their landlords

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what evidence he has evaluated of *(a)* BSE being hereditary and *(b)* BSE infecting land; and if he will make a statement. [23562]

Mrs. Browning *[holding answer 3 April 1996]:* MAFF has funded research into the possible heritability of BSE. Details of this study have been published as "A study of the inheritance of susceptibility to bovine spongiform encephalopathy" by Wijeratne W. V. S. and Curnow R. N., in *The Veterinary Record* in 1990, vol. 126, p5–8, and "The incidence of bovine spongiform encephalopathy in the progeny of affected sires and dams" by R. N. Curnow

and C. M. Hau, in *The Veterinary Record* on 27 April 1996, p407–408. Investigation of any association between bulls used in artificial insemination and incidence of BSE in offspring has also been carried out. This work is an ongoing part of the epidemiological monitoring, and has not identified any evidence of heritability. It has been published in part in "Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy and Related Diseases—An Epidemiological Overview" by J. Wilesmith, in the New Zealand *Veterinary Journal*, 1994, vol. 42, p1–8. No heritable mutations that result in spontaneous or heritable BSE have been identified in bovines.

There is no evidence of any link between BSE transmission and possibly contaminated land. Were this to occur, it would be seen as horizontal transmission of the disease from cattle to cattle. This is not seen. Details of this work was published in *The Veterinary Record* on 1 April 1995, p312 Hoinville et al. A copy of the paper was also annexed to the May 1995 progress report to Parliament, which is in the Library of the House.

Mr. Byers: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to introduce the Narang test to identify cattle infected with BSE before they are destroyed. [25909]

Mrs. Browning *[holding answer 23 April 1996]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer that I gave to the hon. Members for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) and for Pembroke (Mr. Ainger) on 26 April 1996, *Official Report*, column *325*.

Mr. Garrett: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many BSE-infected cow carcases have been dumped in the Attlebridge tip in Norfolk. [27410]

Mrs. Browning *[holding answer 2 May 1996]:* Approximately 360 carcases of BSE suspect animals were disposed of at the Attlebridge tip between September 1988 and December 1990. No carcases have been disposed there since 1990. Only three BSE carcases have been disposed of by burial since the end of 1991; these were all on remote sites where the preferred option—incineration in specialist plant—was not practicable.

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will estimate the cost of the slaughter of cattle of five years old and above in herds in Scotland which have had an incidence of BSE. [23364]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson: I have been asked to reply. It is estimated that there are just over 149,000 animals aged five years or above in Scotland in herds which have an incidence of BSE. Slaughtering animals alone at a cost of about £50 per head would cost around £7.5 million. More substantial would be the economic costs to the meat and dairy industries and compensation to farmers for losses of stock and replacement.

EU Directives

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the directives which have affected his Department in each of the past three years and *(a)* the United Kingdom legislation introduced as a result of the directive, *(b)* the United Kingdom legislation which goes beyond the minimum standards set out in the directive and *(c)* the clauses within each piece of United Kingdom legislation which amplify the minimum standards set out in the directive. [27081]

Mr. Boswell *[holding answer 29 April 1996]:* The directives made in the years 1993 to 1995 and involving the Ministry's policy responsibilities are as follows:

1993

93/1/EEC, 93/5/EEC, 93/8/EEC, 93/9/EEC, 93/10,EEC, 93/17/EEC, 93/19/EEC, 93/23/EEC, 93/24/EEC, 93/25/EEC, 93/26/EEC, 93/27/EEC, 93/28/EEC, 93/35/EEC, 93/40/EEC, 93/43/EEC, 93/45,EEC, 93/48/EEC, 93/49/EEC, 93/50/EEC, 93/51/EEC, 93/52/EEC, 93/53/EEC, 93/54/EEC, 93/55/EEC, 93/56/EEC, 93/57/EEC, 93/58/EEC, 93/60/EEC, 93/61/EEC, 93/62/EEC, 93/64/EEC, 93/66/EEC, 93/69/EEC, 93/70/EEC, 93/71/EEC, 93/74/EEC, 93/77/EEC, 93/78/EEC, 93/79/EEC, 93/85/EEC, 93/99/EEC, 93/102/EEC, 93/106/EEC, 93/107/EEC, 93/110/EEC, 93/111/EEC, 93/113,EEC, 93/114,EEC, 93/117/EEC, 93/118/EEC, 93/119/EEC, 93/120/EEC, 93/121/EEC.

1994

94/13/EC, 94/14/EC, 94/15/EC, 94/16/EC, 94/17/EC, 94/28/EC, 94/29/EC, 94/30/EC, 94/34/EC, 94/35/EC, 94/36/EC, 94/37/EC, 94/39/EC, 94/40/EC, 94/41/EC, 94/42/EC, 94/43/EC, 94/50/EC, 94/51/EC, 94/52/EC, 94/54/EC, 94/59/EC, 94/64/EC, 94/65/EC, 94/70/EC, 94/77/EC.

1995

95/2/EC, 95/4/EC, 95/5/EC, 95/6/EC, 95/8/EC, 95/9/EC, 95/10/EC, 95/11/EC, 95/29/EC, 95/31/EC, 95/33/EC, 95/35/EC, 95/36/EC, 95/37/EC, 95/38/EC, 95/39/EC, 95/40/EC, 95/41/EC, 95/42/EC, 95/44/EC, 95/45/EC, 95/52/EC, 95/53/EC, 95/61/EC, 95/65/EC, 95/66/EC, 95/68/EC, 95/69/EC, 95/70/EC, 95/71/EC, 95/212/EC, 95/498/EC.

The cost of providing the other information sought would be disproportionate.

Intergovernmental Conference

Mr. McAvoy: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations the Government have made to the intergovernmental conference about reforming the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy. [27499]

Mr. Baldry: The Government's approach to the 1996 intergovernmental conference was set out in the White Paper, "A Partnership of Nations". This explained that efforts to secure further reforms of the common agricultural policy would continue in parallel with the intergovernmental conference since such reforms do not require treaty change. The White Paper also made clear the Government's determination to achieve improvements in the operation of the common fisheries policy, including addressing the problem of quota hoppers. If necessary, proposals for amending the treaty to deal with this problem will be submitted to the conference in due course.

Slaughterhouses

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the total cost of work required to be done by slaughterhouses operating under temporary derogations from the Fresh Meat (Hygiene Inspection) Regulations 1992 to enable them to meet the standards designated by the regulations. [27857]

Mrs. Browning: This information is not available. The cost of bringing slaughterhouses up to the structural standards laid down in the Fresh Meat (Hygiene and

Inspection) Regulations 1995, which replaced the 1992 regulations, is a matter for the individual plant operator. It will depend on the nature and extent of the structural work required at each premises and the way in which each operator whose premises is operating at present under a temporarily derogated licence decides to meet the required standards.

General information on the likely costs of meeting the standards laid down is however, contained in the compliance cost assessment on the Fresh Meat (Hygiene and Inspection) Regulations. This was placed in the Library of the House when these regulations were laid before the Parliament on 9 March 1995.

Grants and Loans

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the grants and loans provided by his Department to businesses, together with the criteria they have to meet in order to obtain the subsidy. [28184]

Mr. Boswell: There is a range of grant and loan schemes provided by the Ministry for businesses and individuals. These are summarised, with guidance to applicants, in the Department's publication, "At the Farmers' Service", a copy of which I will send to the hon. Member. This booklet sets out also the main common agricultural policy support schemes and their eligibility criteria.

Hares

Ms Walley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to *(a)* protect the brown hare and *(b)* ban hare coursing. [27503]

Mr. Clappison: I have been asked to reply.

The Joint Nature Conservation Committee, the Government's statutory scientific conservation advisors, commissioned a survey of brown hares between 1991 and 1993. The survey found that while there had been a decline in hare numbers since the 1960s it was not clear if numbers were continuing to decline. The survey concluded that hare coursing had affected only a small proportion of populations and did not pose a threat to national populations.

The biodiversity steering group, chaired by my Department, was set up to advise Government on costed targets for the UK's most threatened and declining species and habitats. The group published its findings on 13 December 1995. "Biodiversity: The UK Steering Group Report" includes a costed action plan for the brown hare. The plan proposes a number of actions to maintain and expand existing populations, with the aim of doubling spring numbers in Britain by 2010.

The Government will publish their response to the report shortly.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Invalid Care Allowance

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the upper earnings limit was last increased for claimants of invalid care allowance. [27384]

Mr. Burt: The earnings limit increased from £40 to £50 with effect from 12 April 1993.

Means Testing

Mr. McAvoy: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proportion of the cash value of all benefits paid out were means tested, in each of the last five years. [27443]

Mr. Burt: The information is set out in the table.

£ million

	1991–92	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*
(a) Total Social Security benefit expenditure	66,382	75,336	82,427	84,866	88,787
(b) Total means tested benefit expenditure	20,328	25,518	28,707	30,308	31,625
"b" expressed as a percentage of "a"	31 per cent.	34 per cent.	35 per cent.	36 per cent.	36 per cent.

Note:
1. Estimated outturn figures are given for 1995–96.
Source:
Departmental Report March 1996 (Tables 1 and 3).

War Pensioners

Mrs. Wise: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many war pensioners have had their allowance for lowered standard of occupation cancelled as a result of his recent changed of practice. [27543]

Mr. Heald: To date, a total of 1,285 awards have been withdrawn.

Child Support Agency

Mr. John Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the cost of setting up an EDS computer system for the Child Support Agency; and what have been its monthly running costs since April 1993. [27406]

Mr. Andrew Mitchell: The information is not available in the format requested. However, the contracts and agreements currently held with EDS for the Child Support Agency computer system are as follows:

	Start date	*End date*
CSA Operational Accounting System	7 March 1992	31 March 2002
CSA Maintenance Assessment	8 July 1992	31 March 2002
CSA Software Support Services	7 March 1992	31 March 2002
CSA Technical Services	1 May 1992	31 March 1997

The monthly running costs, and the value of individual contracts and agreements is commercial in confidence.

The total value of the above projects is estimated as £23 million.

On 1 June 1995, EDS was awarded a 10-year contract for the provision of Data Centre Services for the whole of the DSS—including CSA. This contract is volume/output based. The value depends on future levels of business.

Employees' Rights

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what provision is available to employees of executive agencies under the control of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case; [27601]

(2) what provision is available to employees of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [27600]

Mr. Burt: A woman employed on a permanent appointment, or a fixed-term appointment of two years or more, with at least one year's paid service and who contracts to return to work after her childbirth is entitled to three months and one week paid maternity leave and a maximum of 52 weeks continuous paid and unpaid maternity leave. Fathers are allowed a minimum of two days paternity leave, except in the Contributions Agency, where a minimum of five days is allowed.

In all parts of the Department, staff may apply for career breaks to care for children under 16 or elderly relatives, for special leave to (among other things) care for sick children, to work part time, either on a term-time basis or any other pattern, to job share or to work from home. For all these provisions staff apply to their line managers who deal with applications sympathetically, having regards to the needs of the member of staff, the merits of each case and the needs of the business. In addition, flexible working hours are available to most staff in the Department. Business units are free to appoint staff on annual hours contracts or to work part time or to work from home if that meets their business needs.

Workplace nurseries are provided at various locations throughout the Department where an acceptable business case has been made, funds exist and the facilities provide value for money. Staff may claim family care expenses for any reasonable and unavoidable extra family care expenses where they are required to be away from home on official business outside their normal working hours.

Research Projects

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list *(a)* internal and *(b)* external research projects funded or part-funded by his Department which assess the impact of claimants representation at *(a)* social security appeal tribunals and *(b)* medical appeal tribunals; and if he will make a statement. [27778]

Mr. Burt: We are not funding or part-funding any such research projects. Details of the research programme are published annually in the research yearbook a copy of which is in the Library.

Outreach Workers

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people working as dedicated customer service staff, on an outreach basis, under Benefits Agency officers in Wales have recently been, or are to be, redeployed; and if he will make a statement on the provision of information to potential beneficiaries under the disability living allowance scheme in rural areas. [27149]

Mr. Roger Evans: The administration of the Benefits Agency is a matter for Peter Mathison, the chief executive. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Dafydd Wigley, dated 1 May 1996:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many people working as dedicated customer service staff, on an outreach basis, under Benefit Agency (BA) officers in Wales have recently been, or are to be, redeployed; and if he will make a statement on the provision of information to potential beneficiaries under the Disability Living Allowance (DLA) Scheme in rural areas.

Customer service staff are located in all BA Districts in Wales, where outreach work forms an integral part of their duties. Staff are not dedicated solely to outreach work, however there are currently 317.47 fulltime equivalent posts employed in customer services in Wales. No decisions have been made as yet to the possible redeployment of any customer service staff.

There are seventy-five Benefits Agency outlets in Wales. Customers may obtain benefit advice, including advice on the DLA Scheme, by telephone, face-to-face interview or by post. Benefit information in the form of leaflets, is available in Post Offices and the option of a home visit by a Benefits Agency officer is available if required.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Mental Illness

Ms Lynne: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he will list *(a)* the number of claimants and *(b)* the expenditure on invalidity benefit and incapacity benefit resulting from mental illness for each year since 1990–91; [27973]

(2) if he will list *(a)* the number of claimants and *(b)* the expenditure on invalidity and incapacity benefit due to disability, excluding mental illness, for each year since 1990–91. [27966]

Mr. Burt: Information is not available in the format requested. Expenditure data for invalidity benefit and incapacity benefit cannot be broken down by medical condition. Some information on the numbers of claimants

with mental disorders is available for invalidity benefit and is set out in the table. Comparable information for incapacity benefit is not yet available.

Claimants incapacitated on the last day of the statistical period in connection with a claim for invalidity benefit

Date	*Mental disorder*	*Other incapacities excluding mental disorder*
30 March 1991	207,000	1,099,000
4 April 1992	228,000	1,211,000
3 April 1993	258,000	1,322,000
2 April 1994	278,000	1,403,000

1. Figures are taken form a 1 per cent. sample of all invalidity benefit claims in Great Britain, rounded to the nearest thousand.

Ms Lynne: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what was *(a)* the number of claimants and *(b)* the expenditure on income support due to disability, excluding mental illness, for each year since 1990–91; [27965]

(2) if he will list *(a)* the number of claimants and *(b)* the expenditure on income support due to mental illness in each year since 1990–91. [27967]

Mr. Evans: The information to identify how many income support claimants suffer from a mental illness is not available.

Benefits Agency

Mr. Chris Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to make changes to the Benefits Agency out-of-hours emergency payments service. [27831]

Mr. Roger Evans: This is a matter for Peter Mathison, the chief executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter form Peter Mathison to Mr. Chris Smith, dated 2 May 1996:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what plans he has to make changes to the Benefits Agency (BA) out-of-hours emergency payments service.

As you will be aware I recently outlined the BA's plans for the future delivery of social security benefits based on the BA vision of "right money to the right person at the right time, every time".

It is against this background that the Agency decided to review the need for the out of hours service and the London Emergency Office which provides a service to customers at night and weekends. A decision on its viability is expected later this year.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Grants and Loans

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the grants and loans provided by his Department to businesses, together with the criteria that they have to meet to obtain the subsidy. [28192]

Mr. Burt: The Department of Social Security does not provide grants or loans to businesses.

In-work Benefits

Mr. Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the total annual expenditure on in-work benefits for each of the last 15 years. [27930]

Mr. Burt: The information is in the tables.

In-work expenditure from 1980–81 to 1987–88

£ million

	1980–81	*1981–82*	*1982–83*	*1983–84*	*1984–85*	*1985–86*	*1986–87*	*1987–88*
FIS/family credit	42	66	94	123	126	130	161	180
Disability working allowance	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Housing benefit	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Community charge benefit	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Council tax benefit	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	42	66	94	123	126	130	161	180

In-work expenditure from 1988–89 to 1994–95

£ million

	1988–89	*1989–90*	*1990–91*	*1991–92*	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*
FIS/Family credit	394	425	494	626	929	1,208	1,441
Disability working allowance	0	0	0	0	3	7	11
Housing benefit	0	0	340	395	525	600	700
Community charge benefit	0	0	170	80	95	0	0
Council tax benefit	0	0	0	0	0	130	140
Total	394	425	1,004	1,101	1,552	1,945	2,292

Notes:

1. Amounts expressed in cash prices.

2. Amounts for housing benefit, community charge benefit and council tax benefit include expenditure on recipients who work, but who also get income support.

Source:

1. Social Security Department report 1995–96 and its predecessors.

2. Housing benefit management system annual inquiry (sample 1 per cent.).

Mr. Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will publish a breakdown of the expenditure on in-work benefits for each year since 1980 in net present values. [28083]

Mr. Burt: The information is in the table.

In-work benefit expenditure from 1980–81 to 1987–88

£ million

	1980–81	*1981–82*	*1982–83*	*1983–84*	*1984–85*	*1985–86*	*1986–87*	*1987–88*
FIS/Family credit	91	131	174	217	212	207	249	264
Disability working allowance	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Housing benefit	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Community charge benefit	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Council tax benefit	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	91	131	174	217	212	207	249	264

In-work benefit expenditure from 1988–89 to 1994–95

£ million

	1988–89	*1989–90*	*1990–91*	*1991–92*	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*
FIS/Family credit	543	547	589	702	1,000	1,264	1,480
Disability working allowance	0	0	0	0	3	8	12
Housing benefit	0	0	405	443	566	628	719
Community charge benefit	0	0	202	90	102	0	0
Council tax benefit	0	0	0	0	0	136	144
Total	543	547	1,196	1,235	1,672	2,036	2,355

Notes:
1. Real terms figures calculated using the GDP deflator published in the November 1995 FSBR.
2. Amounts for housing benefit, community charge benefit and council tax benefit include expenditure on recipients who work, but who also get income support.

Source:
1. Social Security departmental report 1995–96 and its predecessors.
2. Housing benefit management system annual inquiry (sample 1 per cent.)

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

School Sport

Mr. Pawsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the number of secondary schools which play regularly organised *(a)* cricket, *(b)* football and *(c)* rugby football. [27267]

Mr. Paice *[holding answer 26 April 1996]:* This information is not collected centrally. The national curriculum requires that all pupils aged 11 to 16 should pursue games as part of their physical education. Precisely which games are taught is a matter for schools themselves to decide.

Evidence from the Office for Standards in Education inspections shows that the overwhelming majority of secondary schools offer traditional team games to their pupils, both within curriculum time and as extra-curricular activity.

Left-handed Children

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what assessment she has made of the number of left-handed children of school age; [27864]

(2) if she will make it her policy to provide equal opportunity at schools for left-handed pupils; [27867]

(3) if she will conduct a study of the special educational needs of left-handed pupils. [27868]

Mrs. Gillan: Left-handedness is not recognised as a special educational need within the meaning of the Education Acts. Provisions relating to pupils with special educational needs apply equally to left-handed and right-handed pupils. The Department does not collect information on the number of left-handed pupils, and has no plans to conduct a study on the special educational needs of such pupils. If my hon. Friend wishes to write to me with details of any case causing him concern, I shall gladly look into it.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what plans she has to help teachers respond appropriately to the special requirements of left-handed pupils, with particular reference to assisting them in avoiding discomfort in writing; [27866]

(2) for what reasons dealing with left-handedness is not among the criteria she specifies for teacher training; [27869]

(3) what assessment she has made of the relative advantage of teaching strategies for coping with left-handedness in pupils during *(a)* initial training, *(b)* induction and *(c)* service. [27865]

Mr. Robin Squire: Teaching methods and arrangements for the induction and inservice training of teachers are not centrally prescribed. It is for schools and teachers to determine the most effective way to ensure they meet the needs of all their pupils, using the resources available to them. The Secretary of State specifies broad criteria for courses of initial teacher training, including the need for new teachers to be able to respond to relevant

individual differences between pupils. Institutions accredited to provide such courses are responsible for meeting these criteria. All schools and courses of initial teacher training are subject to independent inspection followed by published reports.

Training and Enterprise Councils

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans she has to harmonise the rates and rules governing TEC-funded training programmes with Further Education Funding Council funding for colleges; when she expects the research funded by her Department from the Further Education Funding Council on the inequalities in the funding mechanism to be finalised and published; and if she will make a statement. [27776]

Mr. Paice: The Government are committed to raising participation and attainment by young people in education and training and promoting fair competition between providers. In support of this agenda, they are investigating whether there is a case for encouraging a more consistent approach to funding methodologies across school sixth forms, further education sector colleges and work-based training for young people, and to funding levels for similar qualifications in the different sectors.

We have already published for discussion an initial analysis of the comparative public funding cost per qualification achieved by 16 to 19-year-olds in each of the three sectors and placed a copy in the Library.

We are refining this initial analysis and considering the scope for convergence of funding methodologies across 16 to 19 provision in consultation with the Further Education Funding Council, the Training and Enterprise Council national council, local authority associations and others.

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what sums have been provided in *(a)* 1995–96 and *(b)* 1996–97 to fund the range of advice and information centres and other schemes run directly or indirectly by Barnsley and Doncaster TEC; and what assessment she has made of the cost-effectiveness of transferring these funds in future years to careers services. [27634]

Mr. Paice: In 1995–96, training and enterprise councils had flexibility to use up to 2.7 per cent. of the training for work budget provided by the Department to fund local adult advice and guidance services. Barnsley and Doncaster TEC exercised this flexibility to devote £336,280 towards the funding of the advice and information centre—"Skillshops"—run directly by the TEC. The TEC also received £41,000 for an access to assessment project and £28,331 for a gateway to learning project.

In 1996–97, TECs have flexibility to use up to 1 per cent. of their training for work budget to fund local adult advice and guidance services. It will be for Barnsley and Doncaster TEC to decide whether to exercise this flexibility and, if so, how the services might be delivered.

In 1996–96, Barnsley and Doncaster TEC also received funding in respect of advice and information services for young people, comprising £377,044 for careers guidance delivered by careers services to pupils in years 9 and 10; and £14,748 to enhance careers libraries in schools and colleges. For 1996–97, all funding for careers advice and guidance for young people in Barnsley and Doncaster is being routed through Lifetime Careers (Barnsley, Doncaster and Rotherham) Ltd., the company which is contracted to provide careers services in Barnsley and Doncaster.

Access to Work Scheme

Mr. Tom Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what arrangements she intends to introduce to restore the eligibility of self-employed disabled people to apply for support under the access to work scheme. [27623]

Mr. Paice: As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said in her announcement on 26 March, *Official Report*, columns *489–91*, we are considering this issue further.

Office for Standards in Education

Miss Emma Nicholson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what mechanisms of accountability are available to measure performance and ensure value for money for Ofsted. [27632]

Mr. Robin Squire: These are matters for the Office for Standards in Education. I have asked Mr. Chris Woodhead, Her Majesty's chief inspector of schools, to write to the hon. Member.

Standard Spending Assessment Calculations

Miss Emma Nicholson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment to what extent, and for what reasons, standard spending assessment calculations for local authority education budgets differentiate between spending per pupil in *(a)* primary schools and *(b)* secondary schools. [27630]

Mr. Robin Squire: The main determinant of the differential between the primary and secondary allowances per pupil in the education standard spending assessment calculations is the differential in the national pattern of local education authorities—LEA—reported spending between the sectors. The standard spending assessment allocations are not hypothecated: LEAs can and do deploy the resources available to them on a different basis.

Teachers (Early Retirement)

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is *(a)* the total number and *(b)* the number in each LEA of (i) head teachers, (ii) deputy head teachers and (iii) teachers who have taken early retirement on the ground of ill health in each year since 1991; and if she will make a statement. [27832]

Mr. Robin Squire *[holding answer 2 May 1996]:* The table shows the retirements on ill health grounds for England and each local education authority—LEA—area, from the maintained nursery, primary, secondary and special education sector, including grant-maintained schools, for the financial years 1991–92 to 1994–95, the most recent year for which this information is available.

Separate figures are provided for head teachers, deputy head teachers and classroom teachers. The table is restricted to members of the teachers' superannuation scheme in full-time, part-time or occasional service at 31 March immediately before the financial year in which they retired.

Ill health retirements from the maintained nursery, primary, secondary and special education sector

	1991–92			*1992–93*			*1993–94*			*1994–95*		
Financial year of award	*Heads*	*Deputy heads*	*Other*	*Heads*	*Deputy heads*	*Other*	*Heads*	*Deputy heads*	*Other*	*Heads*	*Deputy heads*	*Other*
Corporation of London	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Camden	2	0	7	3	0	7	1	0	10	3	1	16
Greenwich	0	0	10	0	3	10	2	0	9	2	0	15
Hackney	1	1	7	1	1	5	0	1	6	0	0	14
Hammersmith	0	2	5	0	3	5	2	0	9	2	1	20
Islington	1	1	7	0	0	12	1	0	4	2	0	13
Kensington and Chelsea	0	0	4	0	0	5	0	0	5	0	0	4
Lambeth	1	5	7	0	0	8	1	1	18	1	1	10
Lewisham	0	2	15	2	0	10	0	0	14	0	1	13
Southwark	0	1	11	0	1	13	3	1	16	1	1	11
Tower Hamlets	0	0	7	1	1	8	2	0	12	1	0	14
Wandsworth	0	1	8	0	3	10	1	1	14	2	4	14
Westminster	0	0	10	0	2	10	0	0	6	1	1	10
Barking	2	1	6	0	0	8	2	0	15	0	0	12
Barnet	2	1	7	2	1	11	2	0	8	1	2	19
Bexley	0	0	7	0	2	14	3	3	9	2	2	11
Brent	0	0	9	1	0	6	0	0	7	0	1	9
Bromley	3	1	7	1	1	7	3	1	11	1	0	11
Croydon	2	1	13	0	1	15	1	1	21	0	3	21
Ealing	0	0	15	0	0	13	2	1	6	0	0	8
Enfield	1	0	11	1	0	6	0	2	5	1	1	14
Haringey	0	0	5	0	1	5	1	0	4	1	1	12
Harrow	1	0	8	1	2	8	2	1	10	3	2	18
Havering	0	1	16	0	1	19	3	2	13	1	2	14
Hillingdon	2	2	18	0	1	13	0	0	5	0	1	7
Hounslow	2	1	8	1	0	12	0	0	13	5	0	16
Kingston upon Thames	0	0	1	0	0	3	0	0	6	1	0	6
Merton	1	0	3	1	0	4	0	1	10	1	0	6
Newham	0	0	5	1	0	8	1	0	8	1	1	14
Redbridge	2	1	8	1	0	4	1	0	7	1	2	9
Richmond upon Thames	0	1	4	1	0	3	2	0	8	0	1	7
Sutton	2	0	3	0	1	3	0	1	4	0	0	10
Waltham Forest	1	0	8	2	2	7	3	2	18	2	0	12
Birmingham	9	10	67	5	6	78	5	8	81	5	7	89
Coventry	1	3	33	1	2	23	0	4	34	1	1	35
Dudley	0	1	12	2	3	16	2	2	12	1	2	17
Sandwell	3	2	18	0	3	20	2	2	33	3	5	35
Solihull	0	2	13	2	1	16	0	1	13	5	2	17
Walsall	0	0	18	2	5	21	0	2	21	4	4	23
Wolverhampton	5	3	15	6	2	41	3	6	22	6	6	21
Knowsley	3	1	17	0	1	13	2	2	17	0	1	15
Liverpool	2	4	44	4	4	38	8	3	51	6	3	36
St. Helens	1	0	14	3	2	28	1	1	30	3	2	25
Sefton	1	4	22	4	2	28	7	3	33	7	0	24
Wirral	3	4	26	3	1	15	3	4	22	4	0	24
Bolton	2	3	21	4	2	24	2	3	28	3	3	31
Bury	0	1	8	1	1	11	2	1	15	2	2	18
Manchester	4	6	28	5	3	43	5	4	43	3	1	43
Oldham	0	1	14	0	1	16	1	0	27	0	3	18
Rochdale	4	3	17	3	0	13	4	4	24	4	3	21
Salford	0	1	18	0	3	16	2	8	20	1	2	18
Stockport	2	1	31	1	4	28	5	2	37	0	5	38
Tameside	4	1	10	1	5	12	1	1	19	5	4	21
Trafford	1	2	9	0	3	16	4	1	23	0	4	19
Wigan	4	0	17	0	3	13	6	1	33	3	3	18
Barnsley	4	2	14	3	1	16	0	2	24	5	3	24
Doncaster	3	3	15	3	0	18	3	1	26	2	4	22
Rotherham	0	3	16	0	0	18	3	0	21	0	3	22
Sheffield	3	3	28	3	4	25	5	4	38	4	3	26
Bradford	7	4	42	4	3	36	5	8	45	3	4	39
Calderdale	4	2	14	2	1	15	6	0	17	3	2	26
Kirklees	2	3	25	2	2	40	8	6	51	5	4	42
Leeds	2	4	39	4	2	41	4	7	69	3	4	67
Wakefield	7	2	37	3	3	37	2	4	41	2	4	33
Gateshead	0	1	10	0	2	18	1	0	18	1	1	19
Newcastle upon Tyne	5	2	35	0	3	16	3	4	14	5	0	16
North Tyneside	0	2	15	2	0	15	2	1	15	3	0	13
South Tyneside	1	1	12	2	4	14	2	3	14	2	3	12
Sunderland	2	3	26	3	7	30	6	3	32	2	4	36
Isles of Scilly	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	

Ill health retirements from the maintained nursery, primary, secondary and special education sector

Financial year of award	1991–92 Heads	1991–92 Deputy heads	1991–92 Other	1992–93 Heads	1992–93 Deputy heads	1992–93 Other	1993–94 Heads	1993–94 Deputy heads	1993–94 Other	1994–95 Heads	1994–95 Deputy heads	1994–95 Other
Avon	5	5	49	7	5	39	8	7	62	15	8	55
Bedfordshire	5	4	28	6	1	30	6	3	28	8	5	31
Berkshire	8	6	39	6	5	31	3	7	48	10	4	43
Buckinghamshire	8	7	21	4	3	22	8	3	34	9	2	46
Cambridgeshire	8	5	22	4	6	27	6	3	22	4	5	49
Cheshire	7	3	58	9	5	49	12	7	64	11	15	74
Cleveland	3	3	55	4	7	74	6	13	68	9	6	67
Cornwall	8	6	31	5	2	37	8	2	26	4	3	32
Cumbria	5	4	36	5	4	22	5	4	34	7	1	31
Derbyshire	10	6	59	3	1	54	9	3	52	16	9	47
Devon	8	5	64	6	8	67	14	11	70	15	11	88
Dorset	5	5	30	6	5	43	3	3	31	4	6	45
Durham	5	9	38	1	8	53	6	5	51	13	9	60
East Sussex	4	7	31	4	5	41	5	6	46	11	4	54
Essex	4	11	81	6	12	79	12	16	103	16	9	121
Gloucestershire	3	1	24	5	4	20	5	5	31	5	3	28
Hampshire	10	11	97	15	9	110	10	13	140	16	8	151
Hereford and Worcester	8	10	47	12	7	50	11	11	58	14	10	78
Hertfordshire	4	6	63	12	3	45	5	5	52	14	9	73
Humberside	2	6	51	5	5	62	3	3	46	15	7	88
Isle of Wight	0	0	7	0	1	3	2	3	3	2	2	7
Kent	15	15	92	19	17	107	17	8	111	16	7	143
Lancashire	14	18	112	16	12	109	24	13	156	24	19	146
Leicestershire	8	4	57	5	2	45	7	6	51	10	7	58
Lincolnshire	11	9	49	10	6	29	12	6	46	4	6	58
Norfolk	9	10	52	9	7	43	13	8	56	15	7	42
North Yorkshire	6	3	44	6	4	26	9	9	40	14	8	56
Northamptonshire	4	2	35	5	4	34	8	4	61	14	4	51
Northumberland	4	2	18	4	6	15	6	4	24	6	4	18
Nottinghamshire	12	5	74	13	9	79	5	12	73	13	3	82
Oxfordshire	5	2	25	4	6	29	6	2	28	10	4	36
Shropshire	5	2	28	3	1	31	6	3	44	6	5	30
Somerset	9	5	41	11	2	39	8	2	43	9	8	38
Staffordshire	12	6	79	12	14	73	15	9	81	19	9	95
Suffolk	2	4	23	6	1	33	6	5	42	11	5	48
Surrey	11	10	45	6	3	53	7	11	58	10	8	52
Warwickshire	1	3	28	3	8	20	3	4	30	4	5	41
West Sussex	1	3	34	5	3	36	5	3	33	7	5	37
Wiltshire	13	5	32	8	4	28	13	10	35	7	3	51
England	377	339	2,859	368	331	2,927	471	377	3,455	559	384	3,743

Social Charter

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment which paragraphs of article 7 of the European social charter the Government have *(a)* accepted and *(b)* rejected; and, in each case, for what reason. [28102]

Mr. Forth: The Government have accepted paragraphs 2, 3, 5, 6, 9 and 10 of article 7 as the UK legislation on the protection of children and young persons is in conformity with those provisions of the charter. They have not accepted paragraphs 1, 4, 7 and 8 because those provisions do not accord with UK legislation or practice and would reduce employment opportunities for young persons and increase business costs.

Nursery Voucher Scheme

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what financial assistance the Government have given to each of the authorities that have introduced nursery voucher schemes; and if she will make a statement. [28025]

Mr. Robin Squire: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on Monday 29 April 1996, *Official Report*, column *348*.

Higher Education

Mr. Pawsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the current level of Government funding for higher education; and what was the figure in 1979 and 1989 in constant prices. [28091]

Mr. Forth: The current level of Government funding for higher education institutions in England is around £4,600 million. In 1989–90, at constant prices, it was just under £4,000 million. Comparable figures for 1979–80 are not readily available.

Training (London)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women, aged from 16 to 21 years, were involved in a Government-sponsored training scheme in the Greater London area as of 31 March. [27954]

Mr. Paice: This information is not available in the form requested. However, the total number of individuals involved in youth training programmes in London as at 31 March 1996 was 18,424. This includes youth training, youth credits and modern apprenticeships.

Data for adults in training are not collected by age or gender.

Special Needs

Mr. Mills: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the effects of the Children Act 1994 Special Educational Needs Regulation 4 (14) (Special Needs) on the ability to statement the special educational needs of Ben Simpson in the Meriden constituency. [28069]

Mrs. Gillan: The Education Act 1993 and the Education (Special Educational Needs) Regulations 1994 make provision for local education authorities in appropriate cases to assess a child's special educational needs. Regulation 14(4) relieves LEAs of the duty to comply with the statutory time limit for making a statement in certain circumstances, including the child's absence from the LEA's area. If parents are dissatisfied with an LEA's decision in respect of statutory assessment they may appeal to the independent special educational needs tribunal. If parents believe an LEA is failing to comply with a statutory duty, they may complain to the Secretary of State. The Department has received no correspondence about Ben Simpson.

Disabled People (Greater London)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the number of registered disabled people living in the Greater London area as of 30 March. [27955]

Mr. Paice: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service under its chief executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Robert Horne to Mr. Tom Cox, dated 7 May 1996:

The Secretary of State has asked me, in the absence of the Chief Executive, to reply to your question about registered disabled people living in the Greater London area.

I regret that it is not possible to supply the information in the form requested. However, as at 15 April 1996, the latest figures available show that there were 48,685 people registered as disabled in the Greater London area. Of this total 34,229 are male and 14,556 female.

I hope that this information is helpful.

Employees' Rights

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what provision is available to employees of her Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [27590]

Mr. Robin Squire: The following arrangements apply within the Department:

(A) MATERNITY LEAVE

To qualify for departmental unpaid maternity leave an employee must:

Be employed on a permanent basis, as a part-year appointee, or as a recurring temporary appointee.

Produce a maternity statement from a registered medical practitioner or certified midwife, giving the expected week of confinement.

State that they intend to return to work after the baby is born.

Maternity leave—paid and/or unpaid—is allowed for an overall period of 52 weeks from the start of the maternity absence.

Casual employees have a statutory right to take a period of 14 weeks' unpaid maternity leave.

(B) MATERNITY PAY

In addition, meeting the qualifying criteria for unpaid maternity leave, to qualify for paid maternity leave an employee must also:

Be in paid service at the time their maternity leave begins and have at least one year's reckonable service.

Agree to repay any salary received, less any entitlement to statutory maternity pay for the period of maternity leave, if they fail to return to work and complete the equivalent of one month's reckonable service.

Employees will not qualify for paid maternity leave if, immediately before beginning their maternity leave, they are on special unpaid leave, unauthorised absence, or sick leave at no pay or pension rate.

Maternity pay is allowed for a continuous period of three calender months and one week.

Different provisions exist for employees on recurring temporary appointments and for part-year appointees.

Casual employees are not eligible for paid maternity leave under the civil service scheme. If the appointment is subsequently made permanent, casual service will count towards the qualifying period for paid maternity leave.

(C) PATERNITY LEAVE

Two day's paid paternity leave may be taken at the time of the birth, or

during the weeks following the birth when mother and baby leave hospital.

(D) PARENTAL LEAVE

Adoption Leave

Special leave may be granted to the adoptive parent(s):

up to 20 days' paid leave may be taken either before or after the child comes into full-time care

up to 52 weeks' unpaid leave, less any paid leave taken as above

the leave can be taken by either parent, or shared between them

Birth of a second or subsequent child

Special paid leave, up to a maximum of five days may be given:

at the birth of a baby, when alternative arrangements cannot be made to look after other small children

Care for children

Special paid leave up to a maximum of five days may be given when normal child minding arrangements break down unexpectedly.

Up to three weeks' special unpaid leave may be allowed, on line manager's recommendation, to care for school-age children during school holidays, providing the leave is taken in addition to at least two weeks annual leave charted in one or more of the school holiday periods.

(E) FLEXIBLE WORKING HOURS (FWH)

The Department operates a FWH system to provide a more flexible system of attendance for all staff.

All staff may work FWH at line management's discretion.

(F) PART-TIME WORK

The Department operates an equal opportunities policy whereby all posts are considered to be available on a part-time basis.

Staff can apply to change from full-time to part-time employment to suit changing circumstances for a short period or an indefinite period.

Entitlement to annual leave, special leave etc. is on a pro rata basis to the hours worked. Part-time staff are regarded as non-mobile.

(G) JOB SHARING

All posts are considered to be available on a job-sharing basis. This is a voluntary arrangement whereby a full-time post is divided into two part-time jobs. The two job holders work together and share the overall duties and responsibilities of the original full-time post.

(H) LEAVE TO CARE FOR SICK CHILDREN

Special leave with pay may be allowed to a member of staff to care for sick children. Medical evidence is requested to support the application if the absence is over five days.

Line managers consider the circumstances, the operational need and discuss alternatives ie. part-time hours, working from home.

Where longer-term nursing is required, special leave with pay may be allowed to enable staff to make suitable arrangements. Sympathetic consideration is given to requests for special leave without pay if more time is needed to make such arrangements.

(I) HOMEWORKING

There are three main categories of homeworking:

1. Working part-time at home, based in an office with agreed amounts of time homeworking.

2. Home as a base.

3. Working at home on a permanent basis.

Consideration is given to costs, security, communications, management of staff, health and safety, environment and facilities when a manager decides when to transfer work from a normal office environment to a home-based office.

Staff can not be moved into a post without their agreement.

(J) TERM-TIME WORKING

There is provision for term-time working, providing the non-working period is not less than two weeks or more than three months.

Dates of attendance must be agreed in writing in advance.

Pay can be averaged out over the year or be received at the end of each month for periods actually worked. Tem-time appointments are non-mobile. Non-working periods do not count for sick absence pay, qualifying service for higher annual leave, qualifying service for maternity leave, or reckonable service for pension purposes.

(K) ANNUAL HOURS CONTRACTS

There is no standard arrangement for annual hours contracts although consideration would be given to all requests for alternative working patterns.

(L) WORKPLACE NURSERIES

The Department provides a nursery at its head quarters in Runcorn and Sheffield. Both nurseries offer 50 places and the cost to parents ranges from £5.50 per half day to £57.50 for a week. Opening hours are 8 am to 6 pm.

There are also school holiday playschemes, which operate in Darlington, London, Runcorn and Sheffield.

(M) CHILD CARE ALLOWANCES

Staff who have young children can apply for additional child care costs when attending a residential training course or being required to work outside their normal pattern of hours.

(N) CARERS' LEAVE

Special leave with pay can be allowed to help staff cope with serious illness of a partner, close relative or dependant, in order to deal with the initial emergency or care on discharge from hospital, where there is no one else available to provide the care required.

In exceptional circumstances, special leave can be allowed to look after close relatives with minor illnesses.

Special leave without pay can be allowed up to a maximum of six months to care for an aged/infirm relative. Periods in excess of six months may qualify for a career break.

(O) CAREER BREAKS

Career breaks may last for a minimum of six months to a maximum of five years. The period of unpaid leave may be extended for a further 52 weeks if a woman has a second child during the career break.

Staff should have a good attendance record and have achieved a satisfactory performance.

Adult Training Schemes

Ms Lynne: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what was *(a)* the number of people and *(b)* the expenditure on adult training schemes as a result of unemployment caused by mental illness in each year since 1990–91; [27963]

(2) what was *(a)* the number of people and *(b)* the expenditure on adult training schemes as a result of disability, excluding mental illness, in each year since 1990–91. [27964]

Mr. Paice: This information is not available.

Thamesmead Job Club

Mr. Austin-Walker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what consultations her Department held, and with whom, before the decision to close the Thamesmead job club. [28333]

Mr. Forth: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its chief executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Robert Horne to Mr. John Austin-Walker, dated 7 May 1996:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question, in the absence of the Chief Executive, about what consultations took place, and with whom, prior to the decision to close the Thamesmead Job Club.

Unemployment levels in the District have fallen and there has, as a result, been a corresponding reduction in resources available for Job Clubs.

The District Manager did not take the decision to close Thamesmead Job Club lightly. The decision was made on the basis of a review of all Job provision across South East London, taking into account.

(a) the numbers of eligible unemployed people from local Jobcentres;

(b) cost of Job Club provision;

(c) the performance of local Job Club in helping people find jobs;

(d) geographical location of Job Club and travel patterns.

The District Manager, his Business Managers and the Programme Providers across the District, taking full account of the demand for Job Club, took the decision to close Thamesmead to ensure an even distribution of available provision.

All eligible clients in the District will continue to have access to a Job Club, and fares will be reimbursed.

I hope this is helpful

Mr. Austin-Walker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will visit Thamesmead to discuss the proposed closure of the Thamesmead job club with unemployed people in the Thamesmead area. [28330]

Mr. Forth: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its chief executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Mike Fogden to Mr. John Austin-Walker, dated 7 May 1996:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question concerning the closure of Thamesmead Jobclub as the issues raised fall within the operational responsibilities delegated to the Employment Service as an Executive Agency.

The decision to close Thamesmead Jobclub was not taken lightly and was arrived at after a review of all the Jobclub provision within the District.

In reaching the decision to close the Thamesmead Jobclub, we took into account the total number of unemployed people within the Thamesmead catchment area, the cost of the Jobclub provision, it's current performance and referral rates and the overall geographical location of the Jobclub in relation to travel to work patterns.

My District Manager considers that there will be sufficient places available in the existing Jobclubs to meet the local need. Indeed, those attending the Thamesmead Jobclub have been offered alternative placements for which the Employment Service will reimburse their fares in full.

In respect of your request that the Secretary of State visits the clients involved, perhaps the most appropriate course of action would be for the District Manager, Ray Nash, to meet with you and the existing Jobclub members to explain the position. Should you wish to contact him, his telephone number is 0181 308 1618.

I hope this is helpful.

Job Clubs

Mr. Austin-Walker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what assessment she has made of the effectiveness of job clubs; [28331]

(2) how many job clubs are currently in existence; and how many she proposes to *(a)* close and *(b)* open in the next 12 months. [28332]

Mr. Forth: Responsibility for the subject of the questions has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its chief executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Robert Horne at Mr. John Austin-Walker, dated 7 May 1996:

The Secretary of State has asked me, in the absence of the Chief Executive, to reply to your questions about Jobclubs.

The performance of Jobclubs is assessed on a regular basis to provide information which will improve the effectiveness of the Employment Service in helping unemployed people back into work.

Management information is collected monthly and is used to monitor the operation of the programme. The latest management information shows that in 1995/96 just over 95,500 people were placed into jobs following participation in a Jobclub and a further 24,300 took up other opportunities such as training places or starting their own business.

Periodic evaluations of the programme are also carried out. These examine, in more detail, various aspects of the operation and impact of the programme. Details of these studies copies can be obtained through the House of Commons library.

The Employment Service currently maintains a network of 1,338 Jobclubs throughout the country. This will provide places for around 204,000 unemployed people during 1996/97. This includes a number of specialist Jobclubs for people facing particular difficulties returning to the labour market.

With reductions in unemployment the number of Jobclub places will reduce. Decisions about where Jobclubs are located are made by the 154 District Managers who are responsible for the delivery of the full range of Employment Service programmes within their Districts. Wherever possible they will seek to maintain a network of Jobclubs which will be accessible to the vast majority of people of our clients. In some locations particularly in rural areas it may be difficult to operate a full time Jobclub. In these cases we are able to provide jobseekers with a Distance Learning Pack which contains advice and information to help with job search techniques.

Given changes in local labour market conditions it is difficult to be precise about how many Jobclubs will close and how many will be open during the next 12 months. However, I anticipate that the network will reduce by no more than 10 per cent during the year.

I hope this is helpful.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Joint Intelligence Committee

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what progress has been made in reviewing and releasing the records of the Joint Intelligence Committee under the initiative announced on 25 June 1992; what are the locations within the Public Record Office of records which have been released; which years are covered by records which have been released; what records are now planned to be reviewed for release; and if he will make a statement. [28038]

Mr. Freeman: Good progress has been made with reviewing and releasing the records of the Joint Intelligence Committee—JIC—since my right hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, West (Mr. Waldegrave), then the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster announced on 25 June 1992 that JIC papers would in future not be covered by a blanket ban on release, but treated like all other Government records and released after 30 years unless the contents remained sensitive.

JIC minutes and memorandums for the years 1936 to 1950 have been reviewed. Those found to be no longer sensitive have been released in the Public Record Office—PRO—, Kew with the following class references—CAB 56/1–7, CAB 81/87–138, CAB 159/1–8, CAB 158/1–11.

Post-1950 records are currently under review. Releasable records for the years 1951 to 1953 will be transferred to the PRO in early 1997. It is expected that the JIC records will continue to be released in three-year tranches every year until the review has been completed.

Grants and Loans

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will list the grants and loans provided by his Department to businesses, together with the criteria they have to meet in order to obtain the subsidy. [28186]

Mr. Willetts: The Cabinet Office does not make grants or loans to businesses.

Competitiveness White Paper

Mr. Byers: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what plans he has to publish a skills audit as part of the current year's competitiveness White Paper. [28128]

The Deputy Prime Minister: The results of the Government's skills audit will be reported in the competitiveness White Paper. The skills audit itself will be published on the same day as the White Paper.

Mr. Byers: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when he plans to publish the current year's competitive White Paper. [28129]

The Deputy Prime Minister: The third competitive White Paper will be published in the summer.

Whitehall and Industry Group

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will list the members of the board of the Whitehall and Industry Group; and what was the Government's financial contribution to it in 1993–94, 1994–95, 1995–96 and what is proposed for 1996–97. [27346]

Mr. Freeman: The Whitehall and Industry Group has a board of trustees comprising:

John Sacher, CBE, chairman of the Whitehall and Industry Group; director of IT, Marks and Spencer plc;

Brian Fox, head of senior civil service group, Cabinet Office, Office of Public Service;

Geoff Keeys, formerly director of personnel, the Prudential Corporation;

Alice Perkins, deputy director—public spending, HM Treasury; and,

Richard Power, formerly communications director, Forte.

It also has a number of patrons. They are:

Sir Robin Butler, GCB CVO, secretary of the cabinet and head of the home civil service;

Sir Terry Burns, GCB, permanent secretary, HM Treasury;

Sir John Coles, KCMG, permanent secretary, Foreign and Commonwealth Office;

Bob Ayling, chief executive, British Airways;

Howard Davies, deputy governor, Bank of England; and

Christopher Haskins, chairman, Northern Foods.

The groups funding is made up as follows:

Year	*Grant* £	*Departmental candidate fees* £	*Company subscriptions* £	*Other income* £	*Total turnover* £
1993–94	20,000	34,350	61,690	8,960	125,000
1994–95	20,000	47,325	98,375	27,300	193,000
1995–96	35,000	70,000	147,150	51,850	304,000
1996–97	35,000	81,500	175,500	54,500	346,500

The Government's financial contribution is represented by the grant and departmental candidate fees.

Cabinet Office Report

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will list by name, department and organisation the outward and inward secondments, non-executive appointments and attachments referred to in table 40 of the Cabinet Office report 1996, Cm 3220. [27379]

Mr. Freeman: The Office of Public Service does not collect centrally comprehensive information on inward and outward secondments and attachments. The full detailed information requested in addition to the aggregate data already published can be obtained only at disproportionate cost. However, when information was last collected centrally, in 1995, we received details of 57 civil servants who, at that time, held, or were due to take up, non-executive appointments within private sector companies either for developmental reasons or on an ex officio basis. Although some details may have changed, the names of the Departments, civil servants and organisation involved are as listed.

Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food

A. R. Burne: Albert Fisher

R. W. Hathaway: RHM

G. A. Hollis: Dalgety

M. M. Parker: Cadbury

R. G. Purnell: H. R. Wallingford

HM Customs and Excise

A. Sawyer: Royal Bank of Scotland

Ministry of Defence

C. V. Balmer: Marks and Spencer

R. P. Crane: Thorn Security

A. C. H. Mace: Avery

D. R. Morris: Rank Organisation

B. A. E. Taylor: Stirling Fibre Ltd.

Employment Service

G. Kennedy: Three Town Initiative

P. McCabe: Great Easterhouse Development Co., Ltd.

Department of the Environment

R. G. Courtney: Woods of Colchester Ltd. (GEC)

N. Glass: CV Apparel Ltd. (Coates Viyella)

J. Hobson: Tarmac

D. A. Nichols: Anglian Water

W. P. S. Rickett: Redland Roof Tiles
J. F. Stoker: Hanson plc
A. G. Watson: AMEC
Home Office
J. Thompson: KPMG
Foreign and Commonwealth Office
A. Green: Vickers Defence Systems
C. Humfrey: J. C. Bamford
J. Ling: RTZ Borax
V. Sutherland: Save and Prosper
K. Tebbit: Mott Macdonald
D. Wright: AEA Technology
Lord Chancellor's Department
C. Everett: IBM
N. Oppenheimer: Marks and Spencer
Royal Mint
David Snell: OGWR Partnership Trust plc
Scottish Office
A. W. Denham: The Wise Group
D. Hart: Westerhailes Partnership Co., Ltd.
I. McCall: Scottish Design
D. Y. A. McFaden: United Distillers
W. A. MacGregor: Strathclyde Green Belt Company
E. Mackay: Moray Firth Maltings
G. Rooney: Local Investing Networking Co., Ltd.
E. Weeple: Westerhailes Partnership Co., Ltd.
Department of Social Security
R. Allen: Marks and Spencer
Department of Trade and Industry
B. Bender: BTR Industries Ltd
P. Bunn: Glynwood Plastics Ltd
S. Charik: European Transonic Wind Tunnel
G. S. Dart: Laing Engineering Ltd
R. C. Dobbie: Vickers
A. Eggington: BOC UK Gases Ltd
I. Jones: Glynwed Consumer Products
M. K. O'Shea: Seven Seas Ltd
M. Mayer: British Approvals Board for Telecoms
W. Paton: Optimat Ltd
J. Phillips: Forward Trust Group Ltd
M. Stanley: IBM
A. J. Wallard: Rank Cintel
Department of Transport
R. Balme: P&O European Transport Services Ltd
J. Denning: Lloyds Register Quality Assurance Ltd
D. McMillan: P&O European Transport Services Ltd
HM Treasury
P. Gray: Laing Management

Ministerial Car Fleet

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what has been the size of the ministerial car fleet in each year since 1979. [28028]

Mr. Freeman: As this is a purely operational matter I have asked the chief executive of the Security Facilities Executive to reply to the hon. Member.

Letter from John King to Ms Glenda Jackson, dated 7 May 1996:

I have been asked by Mr Freeman, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (who has Ministerial responsibility for the Government Car Service (GCS)), to provide you with a response to your Parliamentary Question concerning the size of the Ministerial car fleet. I am the Chief Executive of the Agency with operational responsibility for the GCS.

Full records showing the size of the GCS Ministerial fleet are only available for the last four years and are as set out below:

Year	*Number of cars*
1992/3	90
1993/4	90
1994/5	90
1995/6	86

Employees' Rights

Ms Jowell: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what provision is available to employees of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, (n) carers' leave and (o) career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [27588]

Mr. Willetts: The provision for the Cabinet Office including the Office of Public Service is as follows:

	Available	*Comment*	*Criteria*
(a) Maternity leave	Yes	3 months, 1 week	After one year's service otherwise statutory terms
(b) Maternity pay	Yes	3 months, 1 week	After one year's service otherwise statutory terms
(c) Paternity leave	Yes	2 days	—
(d) Parental leave	Yes	Paid or unpaid Special available	Case decided on merits
(e) Flexible working hours	Yes	—	—
(f) Part-time working	Yes	—	—
(g) Job sharing	Yes	—	—
(h) Leave to care for sick children	Yes	Up to five days paid special leave per year, unpaid leave available	Case decided on merits
(i) Home working	Yes	—	—
(j) Term-time contracts	Yes	—	—
(k) Annual hours contracts	No	Would consider proposals	—
(l) Work place nursery	No	Westminster Holiday Playscheme. Access to a place in an emergency	—
(m) Child care allowances	No	Able to meet extra costs incurred at the Department's insistence	—

	Available	Comment	Criteria
(n) Carer's leave	Yes	Paid or; unpaid Special Leave available	Case decided on merits
(o) Career breaks	Yes	Up to five years	One year of satisfactory service

Ms Jowell: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what provision is available to employees of executive agencies under the control of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [27589]

Mr. Willetts: The implementation of policies on all of these matters is delegated to the chief executives of my agencies. I have, therefore, asked the chief executives of the Property Advisers to the Civil Estate, Central Office of Information, Chessington Computer Centre, Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency, Civil Service College, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, Occupational Health and Safety Agency, Recruitment and Assessment Services, The Security Facilities Executive and the Buying Agency to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from N. E. Borrett to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 3 May 1996:

Deputy Prime Minister has asked me to reply to your Question relating to conditions of service and workplace facilities.

The answer to each section in respect of PACE is as follows:

(a) Maximum of 52 weeks paid and unpaid.

(b) Full pay for three months and one week, or fourteen weeks, whichever is the longer.

The above are automatic for permanent Civil Servants with one year's service.

(c) Two days: this is automatic.

(d) Up to five days paid leave—may be followed by unpaid leave.

(e) A flexible working hours scheme operates.

(f) Staff of any grade or sex may apply to be considered for part-time working.

(g) Job sharing is available.

(h) As at (d) above.

(i) May be offered as part of an alternative flexible working pattern. The above are subject to approval by management.

(j) Not available.

(k) Not available.

(l) None.

(m) Not available.

(n) As at (d) above.

(o) A career break of up to five years (unpaid) may be granted for child rearing/elder care. To qualify, staff must be permanent employees who have satisfactorily completed an initial probation period. In addition, they must have a satisfactory record of attendance and conduct, and performance that fully meets the requirement of the grade.

I trust that the above gives all the information.

Letter from Mike Devereau to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 1 May 1996:

The Deputy Prime Minster has asked me to reply, in respect of the Central Office of Information, to your question about the provision of facilities for employees.

COI operates the following schemes for all of its permanent staff:

Maternity Leave

Maternity Pay

Paternity Leave

Flexible Working Hours

Part-time Work

Job Sharing

and through its special paid, or unpaid, leave arrangements:

Parental Leave

Leave to care for sick children

Carer's Leave

Career Breaks

Details of all these schemes and, where appropriate, the criteria used to judge eligibility are set out in the Staff Handbook, a copy of which is held by each staff member.

There is considerable flexibility for staff employed on a part-time basis to agree contracts which suit their personal circumstances. For example COI currently employs people whose contracts allow them to: work from home, work three weeks in four, return to their homes in other countries for regular periods.

COI does not provide in house child care or nursery facilities. However staff in London can use the Westminster holiday playscheme and free information and advice on childcare facilities is available to all staff from the private sector and the COI Welfare Officer.

There is no provision for childcare allowances although COI offers a subsidy of 50% of the cost of the holiday playscheme.

Letter from R. N. Edwards to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 1 May 1996:

The Deputy Prime Minister has asked me to reply to your Question about employee conditions and workplace facilities.

The answer to each section in respect of Chessington is as follows:

(a) 14 weeks paid. Maximum of 52 weeks paid and unpaid;

(b) full pay for 14 weeks;

(c) 2 days;

(d) up to 5 days special paid leave in any one leave year may be granted when serious personal or domestic problems arise which require the personal attention of a staff member;

(e) a flexible working hours scheme operates;

(f) over 50 staff work part-time hours;

(g) job sharing is available;

(h) allowed as at d. above;

(i) practised as the need arises;

(j) not available;

(k) not available;

(l) a nursery on site for up to 24 children between 3 months and 5 years;

(m) not available;

(n) allowed as at d. above;

(o) a Keep in Touch (KIT) operates, which allows for a period of up to 5 years special unpaid leave for staff who have to give up work because of unavoidable commitments.

The criteria for eligibility where appropriate are as follows:

a., b, and c. Automatic.

d., h., i., n. and o. Subject to approval by line management and personnel.

e. All staff, except computer shift workers and support staff, can work flexible hours.

f. and g. We accommodate part-time working in most parts of Chessington and try to suit the needs of staff subject to business needs. With regard to job sharing this is agreed where there are 2 members of staff who can provide continuous cover between them;

l. To date all requests for places have been met, but should demand exceed the number of places available, then priority is given to parents to whom a high level of training has already been given; or parents from grades where Chessington is experiencing a shortage of staff; or where particular skills are required.

I trust the above gives all the information required. If not please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Letter from Robin Guenier to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 1 May 1996:

As Chief Executive of the Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency (CCTA), I am responding to your recent question raised about certain aspects of working conditions for employees of departments under the control of the Deputy Prime Minister.

In general CCTA's policies do not differ from those of the Cabinet Office.

Maternity leave and maternity pay, paternity leave and parental leave are granted by CCTA in accordance with the Civil Service Management Code.

We offer all staff the opportunity to participate in flexible working hours and part time working. We also have people on career breaks.

We have had staff job sharing and have staff involved in home-working schemes.

We do not have a workplace nursery but do offer an assisted holiday playscheme facility.

While we have never been asked for term time contracts, annual hours contracts or carers leave we would consider any application sympathetically, within the guidelines of the Management code.

Childcare allowance is not offered as a matter of course although we pay the additional cost of childcare if a member of staff is away on business or attending a residential training course.

Letter from Dr. S. H. Hickey to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 3 May 1996:

The Deputy Prime Minister has asked me to reply to your Question about various provisions available to employees of the Civil Service College.

(a) (b) Maternity Leave and Pay

Paid maternity leave is available to all staff for a period of three months and one week provided that the employee makes a statement of their intention to return to work after confinement and is in paid service at the time the period of maternity leave begins and has rendered one year's service.
Maternity leave can be extended to include unpaid leave for a further period provided that the total of paid and unpaid leave does not exceed 52 weeks.

(c) Paternity Leave

Two days paid paternity leave is available to all staff irrespective of grade or length of service.

(d) Parental Leave

No specific provision for parental leave but unpaid leave is available to all staff to cover need.

(e) Flexible Working Hours

A flexible working hours scheme is available to all staff up to and including SEO level subject to the business and operational needs of the organisation.

(f) Part-Time Work

Part-time working is available to all staff subject to the business needs of the organisation.

(g) Job-Sharing

Job-sharing is available to all staff subject to the business and operational needs of the organisation.

(h) Leave to Care for Sick Children

Two days special paid leave is available to all staff to provide for emergency care of sick children.

Special unpaid leave is also available to all staff for an unspecified period determined by need and management agreement.

(i) Homeworking

There is no current provision for contracted home-working but the facility to work from home is available to all staff subject to management agreement.

(j) Term-Time Contracts

There is no current provision for term-time contracts.

(k) Annual Hours Contracts

There is provision for a limited number of annual hours contracts. Availability is determined by the business needs of the organisation.

(l) Workplace Nurseries

A workplace nursery is available to all staff.

(m) Childcare Allowances

There is no current provision for specific childcare allowances.

(n) Carer's Leave

Two days special paid leave is available to all staff to provide emergency care for infirm relatives.

Special unpaid leave is also available to all staff for an unspecified period which is determined by need and agreement.

(o) Career Break Schemes

A career break scheme is available to all staff for a period not exceeding five years. Eligibility for career breaks is centred around domestic need such as childcare, care of elderly or infirm relatives, or relocation of partner's work to distant locations. All staff must state their intention to return to work before a career break is granted.

Letter from Mike Lynn to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 2 May 1996:

I have been asked to reply, so far as HMSO is concerned, to your Parliamentary question about various employment provisions. The information is as follows:

(a) Maternity Leave

All pregnant employees qualify for 14 weeks leave regardless of their length of service or hours worked. Those with 1 or more year's service are entitled to 14 weeks paid leave, and up to 52 weeks unpaid leave.

(b) Maternity Pay

Employees with a minimum of 26 weeks service and up to 1 year's service receive statutory maternity pay (SMP). After 1 year's service they receive the first 14 weeks at full pay and 4 weeks at statutory maternity pay (SMP).

(c) Paternity Leave

2 days paid leave may be taken either before, during or after the birth.

(d) Parental Leave

Where there is no immediate viable alternative, e.g. assistance from relatives, Urgent Domestic Leave of up to one week with pay may be taken. In exceptional circumstances this may be extended as unpaid leave. Adoptive leave, involving longer periods, is also available.

(e) Flexible Working Hours

Flexible working hours are arranged between managers and staff within each area. The determining factor is the need to staff the office for the duration of the working day, ensuring adequate cover at peak times.

(f) Part Time Working

HMSO encourages part time working and currently has 103 staff working part time between 15 and 35 hours per week.

(g) Job Sharing

Currently 8 jobs are shared, involving 16 members of staff.

(h) Leave to Care for Sick Children

Up to 1 week's paid leave, followed by agreed extended unpaid leave.

(i) Home Working

There are currently 5 people formally regarded as home working. In addition, many of our sales staff are based at home, with most of their work on the road.

(j) Term Time Contracts

There are currently no contracts of this nature.

(k) Annual Hours Contracts

HMSO has two units in London that work annual hours contracts, presently covering 116 staff. A further 75 will join the scheme later this year.

(l) Workplace Nurseries and Childcare Facilities

HMSO provides 20 places at a nursery at Norwich, in partnership with a local college, and 50 places per day at play schemes for the 6 school holiday periods.

(m) Childcare Allowances

The nursery and play schemes are subsidised by HMSO.

(n) Carers Leave (Sick Nursing)

Up to 1 week paid leave, followed by agreed extended unpaid leave, alternatively temporary adjustments to working hours may be granted.

(o) Career Break Scheme

Staff who have completed 2 years permanent service may be granted a Career Break for a maximum of 5 years. There are a total of 7 staff currently taking career breaks, and 3 have successfully returned.

Letter from J. L. Gordon to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 1 May 1996:

The Deputy Prime Minister has asked me to reply to your questions. The information relating to the Occupational Health & Safety Agency is as follows:-

(a)	Maternity Leave	Provision in accordance with Civil Service arrangements generally.
(b)	Maternity Pay	
(c)	Paternity Leave	OHSA allows 2 days special leave with pay.
(d)	Parental Leave	Special leave with pay depending on particular circumstances, amount of annual leave etc. Each case decided on merit.
(e)	Flexible Working Hours	Certain more junior grades at HQ participate in a scheme. Not appropriate in some areas because of the need to respond to customer requirements.
(f)	Part-Time Work	OHSA has number of staff on part-time work/job share. Approval to some extent governed by needs of customers and whether it is possible to arrange hours around requirements.
(g)	Job Share	
(h)	Leave to Care for Sick Children	No circumstances have arisen, other than odd days when special leave with pay has been given. Any case would be dealt with on its merits.
(i)	Home Working	No formal arrangements exist but where appropriate line manages have authority to authorise on a case by case basis.
(j)	Term-Time Contracts	None currently in place but possible within constraints of customer requirements.
(k)	Annual Hours Contracts	None in place.
(l)	Workplace Nurseries	The Agency is small and staff too widely scattered to make this a viable proposition.
(m)	Childcare Allowances	No provision.
(n)	Carers Leave	No requests have been received to date but would most possibly be dealt with as special leave and each case dealt with on its merits.
(o)	Career Break Schemes	Because of the size of the Agency it is difficult to operate a full career break scheme. There has been one case in recent years where a break of 2 years was approved.

I trust this information is sufficient for your needs.

Letter from Craig Muir to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 3 May 1996:

The Deputy Prime Minister has asked me to reply to your parliamentary question. Recruitment and Assessment Services are happy to provide the enclosed information.

Recruitment and Assessment Services (RAS) follows the guidelines of the Civil Service Management Code in all issues.

1 *Maternity leave/pay*—Departments and Agencies must provide 3 months and 1 week's paid maternity leave (if paid monthly) and 14 weeks paid maternity leave (if paid weekly) to a woman civil servant for a period of continuous absence during confinement providing that she:

A. state that she intends to return to work in the Civil Service after her confinement, and that she agrees to repay any payment made during that period if she fails to return (such payment will exclude any Statutory Maternity Pay to which there is entitlement);

B. is in paid service with her department/agency at the time her maternity leave begins and has rendered at least one year's such service;

C. is not employed on a casual, standby or short notice appointment; and

D. is not employed on a Fixed Term Appointment of less than two years.

2 *Paternity leave*—male civil servants whose appointment is permanent or for two or more years are entitled to 2 days' paid paternity leave. Departments and agencies may allow paternity leave to any other appointment, at their discretion. Paternity leave cannot be paid during periods of unpaid absence.

3 *Parental leave*—RAS has not had any staff that have applied for parental leave, however each case would be assessed at the time of application.

4 RAS operates a system of *flexible working hours* for all permanent, fixed term and staff on loan. It is the responsibility of the line managers to ensure the system is not abused. RAS does not have anyone who is on a *annual hours contract.*

5 RAS has *part time/and job sharing* posts within its organisation, and is very mindful of staff needs.

6 *Leave to care for sick children/term time contracts/carers' leave/career break*—Departments/agencies have discretion to grant special leave with or without pay where they consider this to be necessary or justified. In determining whether special leave should be granted, departments and agencies should mainly have regard to the effect of such leave on the discharge of public business. In determining whether special leave with pay should be granted, departments and agencies will in addition need to be satisfied that the circumstances of the particular case justify such a concession. An example of special leave with pay would be for a bereavement of a close family member, 5 days with pay would be granted.

7 RAS does not provide *workplace nurseries*, or *childcare allowances*.

8 *Home working*—RAS allows staff to work from home providing they do not work in a supervisory role. They must be contactable by telephone and respond to queries within 1 hour.

Letter from John Smith to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 3 May 1996:

The Deputy Prime Minister has asked me to reply to your Parliamentary Question:

"To ask the Deputy Prime Minister, what provision is available to employees of executive agencies under the control of his Department for (a) maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case."

The answer to each section in respect of SAFE is as follows:

(a) Maximum of 52 weeks paid and unpaid.

(b) Full pay for three months and one week, or fourteen weeks, whichever is the longer. The above are automatic for permanent Civil Servants with one year's service.

(c) Two days; this is automatic.

(d) Up to five days paid leave—may be followed by unpaid leave.

(e) A flexible working hours scheme operates.

(f) Staff of any grade or sex may apply to be considered for part-time working.

(g) Job sharing is available.

(h) As at (d) above.

(i) May be offered as part of an alternative flexible working pattern. The above are subject to approval by management.

(j) Not available.

(k) Not available.

(l) None.

(m) Not available.

(n) As at (d) above.

(o) A career break of up to five years (unpaid) may be granted for child rearing/elder care. To qualify, staff must be permanent employees who have satisfactorily completed an initial probation period. In addition, they must have a satisfactory record of attendance and conduct, and performance that fully meets the requirement of the grade.

I trust that the above gives all the information required.

Letter from S. P. Sage to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 2 May 1996:

The Deputy Prime Minister has asked me to reply to your Parliamentary Question.

The provisions made available to employees within The Buying Agency in relation to questions A–O of your fax dated 29 April 1996 are largely determined by the policies currently laid down in the Staff Hand Book, as follows:

(a) Maternity Leave

A woman will be allowed paid maternity leave for a period of continuous absence before and after confinement of 3 months and 1 week or 14 weeks (whichever is the greater) provided that she satisfies the necessary criteria. "Confinement" is the date of birth of a child, whether living or not, after 24 weeks of pregnancy.

(b) Maternity Pay

This is covered by the Statutory Regulations within the EP(C)A 1973 and subsequent amendments TURER 1993. Statutory Maternity Pay is a statutory requirement which applies to the Civil Service as an employer in the same way as any other employer.

(c) Paternity Leave

Male staff are entitled to 2 days paid paternity leave.

(d) Parental Leave

No such category as yet for TBA.

(e) Flexible Working Hours

All staff are permitted to participate in a flexible working hours system unless there is a particular reason for them not being included.

Flexible Working Hours are: (7.24 standard day)

Core Times

7.30–10.00 am

12.00–14.00 pm

16.00–18.00 pm (15.30 pm on Fridays)

Allowance to carry over from one period to the next

Credit: 22.12 hours

Debit: 11.06 hours

(f) Part-time Work

The Agency considers all requests. There are currently 8 members of TBA staff engaged on a part-time basis.

(g) Job Sharing

Job share has been arranged on 5 or 6 occasions in the past but there are no job share arrangements at present. As with (f) requests are considered and approval will be given to the mutual satisfaction of all parties.

(h) Leave to Care for Sick Children

Unpaid leave is granted for a limited period until more permanent arrangements can be made.

(i) Home Working

15 TBA staff currently work from home.

(j) Term-time Contracts

Not applicable at present.

(k) Annual Hours Contracts

Not applicable at present.

(l) Work Place Nurseries

This has previously been investigated, however no scheme is presently in place. There is as yet no demand from staff.

(m) Childcare Allowances

Not applicable at present.

(o) Career Break Schemes and What Criteria Are Used to Judge Eligibility

Several TBA staff have availed themselves of the Career Break Scheme in the past.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Hon. Members' Employees

Mr. Rooker: To ask the Lord President of the Council how many right hon. and hon. Members have not lodged contracts of employment at the Fees Office for employees paid by the Fees Office from the office costs allowance; and how many employees are affected. [27553]

Mr. Newton: There are 21 right hon. and hon. Members who have not lodged contracts of employment with the Fees Office for employees paid from the office costs allowance, and 53 current employees are affected.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 8 May 1996

TREASURY

Works of Art

Mr. Wilson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will list those locations where the register of conditionally exempt works of art is available for inspection by *(a)* hon. Members and *(b)* the general public; [27115]

(2) pursuant to his reply of 16 April, *Official Report* column *367*, if he will as an interim measure place in the Library a printed copy of the register of conditionally exempt works of art. [27125]

Mr. Jack: The computerised register, which now has more than 16,500 entries, can be consulted at the national art library in the Victoria and Albert museum, London, the national library of Scotland, Edinburgh, the national museum of Wales, Cardiff, and the Ulster museum, Belfast. Copies of the register in computer-readable format may also be purchased from the capital taxes office of the Inland Revenue for £10. In addition, the register will be available on the Internet, and in a much improved and user-friendly form before the end of the year.

European Union

Mr. David Shaw: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 22 April, *Official Report*, column *10–11*, if he will list the total net contributions to the European union since 1973 in current terms. [28078]

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: The UK's net contributions to the EC budget since 1973, in current terms, are set out in the table.

UK's net contribution to the EC budget, at current market prices

Year	*Net contribution at 1995–96 prices (£ million)*
1973–74	619
1974–75	–189
1975–76	69
1976–77	847
1977–78	1,861
1978–79	2,300
1979–80	2,268
1980–81	505
1981–82	445
1982–83	1,360
1983–84	1,695
1984–85	1,903
1985–86	1,580
1986–87	1,887
1987–88	2,658
1988–89	1,604
1989–90	3,153
1990–91	2,601
1991–92	1,057
1992–93	2,334
1993–94	2,294
1994–95	1,686
1995–96	[1]3,533

[1] Latest estimate.

Office for National Statistics

Mr. Matthew Banks: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what appointments have been made to the statistics advisory committee and to the management board of the Office for National Statistics. [28586]

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: The statistics advisory committee advises the director of the Office for National Statistics on the statistical work of the office, on annual corporate targets and on his responsibilities as head of the Government statistical service. It comprises members who are customers, data suppliers or others with appropriate knowledge acting in a personal capacity. Members of the committee are:

Dr. D. Holt (Chairman): Director of the Office for National Statistics, Registrar General for England and Wales, and head of the Government statistical service

Mr. Khalid Aziz: Chairman, the Aziz Corporation

Professor Jonathan Bradshaw: Director, Institute for Research in the Social Sciences, University of York

Mr. Simon Briscoe: Chief UK economist, Nikko Europe plc

Sir Samuel Brittan: Assistant editor, *Financial Times*

Sir Kenneth Calman: Chief medical officer

Mr. Alain Chantraine: Director of general matters, international and interinstitutional relations, and external and intra-community trade statistics, Eurostat

Mr. Robert Clements: Head of social and general statistics, House of Commons Library

Mr. Robert Culpin: Second permanent secretary, HM Treasury

Professor Liam Donaldson: Regional director and director of public health, NHS Executive Northern and Yorkshire region

Ms Teresa Graham: Partner, Baker Tilly, Chartered Accountants; member of the Government's deregulation task force

Mr. Michael Jennings: Assistant chief executive, Surrey county council

Mr. Mervyn King: Executive director, Bank of England

Ms Ruth Lea: Head of the policy unit, Institute of Directors; member of the Nurses' Pay Review Body; member of the Economic and Social Research Council research centres board

Professor Denise Lievesley: Director, Economic and Social Research Council data archive

Professor Howard Newby: Vice-Chancellor, University of Southampton

Mrs. Bridget Rosewell: Joint managing director, Business Strategies Ltd; member of the Treasury's panel of independent forecasters

Mr. Andrew Sentance: Director, centre for economic forecasting, London Business School

Professor Adrian Smith: President, Royal Statistical Society

Mrs. Alison Wright: Director general, British Invisibles

Secretary

Mr. John Pullinger: Director of policy and planning, Office for National Statistics.

The management board of the Office for National Statistics assists the director of policy development, strategic thinking, supervising the management of the office and external accountability. It comprises senior managers from the office and non-executive members. The two non-executive members of the board are:

Mr. John Beaumont: Director of strategy and business development, Energis Communications Limited

Mrs. Mary Berg: Independent consultant; equal opportunities commissioner.

Value Added Tax

Mr. Spearing: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what powers of treaty articles, regulations or directives of the European Community relating to VAT limit the discretion of national Governments or parliaments to determine the degree of retrospective application of judgments made in accordance with *(a)* treaty articles, *(b)* regulations, *(c)* national primary or secondary legislation, pursuant to directives and *(d)* the case of Primback *v.* Customs and Excise. [27572]

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory *[holding answer 1 May 1996]:* There are no treaty articles, regulations or directives of the European Community relating to VAT which specifically limit the discretion of national Governments or parliaments to determine the degree of retrospective application of judgments of the sort instanced above. Member states are entitled to operate national procedures limiting the number of years' overpaid tax which will be refunded, provided such rules do not discriminate between actions based on EC law and those based only on national law, or make it impossible in practice to exercise EC rights.

Business Subsidies

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the grants and loans provided by his Department to businesses, and the criteria they have to meet in order to obtain the subsidy. [28193]

Mrs. Angela Knight *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* The Treasury does not make grants or loans to businesses.

HEALTH

GP Lists

Mr. David Nicholson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what provisions in the patients charter offer *(a)* security, *(b)* reassurance, *(c)* appeal and *(d)* redress to elderly patients in respect of the possibility of being removed from their original general practitioner's list; and what representations he has received to amend (i) the charter and (ii) the law in these respects. [27246]

Mr. Malone: All patients, regardless of age, have a patients charter right to be registered with a general practitioner. Health authorities have a legislative responsibility to ensure that this happens. There are no provisions in the patients charter to prevent general practitioners from removing patients from their lists.

Guidance issued by the General Medical Council in May 1992 makes it clear to general practitioners that it is unacceptable to discriminate against patients on grounds of their age, sex, sexual orientation, race, colour, religious belief, perceived economic worth or the amount of work that they are likely to generate by virtue of their clinical condition. This guidance is intended to be read in conjunction with the booklet, "Duties of a Doctor". The GMC is the professional body for doctors and has a range of measures that it can take against a doctor who acts in a manner that it considers to be unacceptable.

We have received a number of representations regarding the law in this respect.

Silicone Implants

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what studies he has commissioned in the last five years, on the evaluation of symptomatic illness of British women who have silicone implants. [27774]

Mr. Horam: None.

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what number of patients receive silicone implants annually in the United Kingdom; [27773]

(2) how many British women have received silicone implants in the United Kingdom since 1970. [27775]

Mr. Horam: The information is not available centrally.

Community Care

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to investigate the operation and resourcing of community care. [28160]

Mr. Bowis: We monitor the operation of community care on an on-going basis. This includes work by the social service inspectorate, the regular collection and publication of statistics and longer-term research to evaluate progress.

Resources for community care are considered fully each year as part of the public expenditure process.

Burnley Health Care NHS Trust

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health on what *(a)* basis and *(b)* calculation Burnley Health Care NHS trust was allocated 4.7 per cent. of the north western general purposes fund; and what sum this percentage represents. [28098]

Mr. Horam: Burnley Health Care national health service trust received £31,257 as its share of the regional general purpose trust fund held by the former western regional health authority. The sum is calculated, pro rata, on the trust's 1994–95 revenue figure.

Residential Care

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what information he has evaluated on the number of pensioners who have sold property to pay for residential care, broken down by health authority area. [28094]

Mr. Bowis: This information is not available centrally.

Dudley Group of Hospitals NHS Trust

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list the management consultants used to prepare the Dudley Group of Hospitals NHS trust's capital investment strategy; and what is the value of contracts awarded; [28158]

(2) what plans the Dudley Group of Hospital NHS trust has to employ consultants to assist it further with its capital investment strategy; and what budget has been allocated for consultancy work during the 1996–97 financial year. [28159]

Mr. Horam: The employment of consultants by national health service trusts is a matter for them and no information is available centrally on such contracts.

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the employment consequences of the implementation of Dudley Group of Hospitals NHS trust's proposed capital investment strategy option 3. [28092]

Mr. Horam: None. The employment consequences of a national health service trust's capital investment proposals are a matter for the trust's management.

NHS Estates

Mr. Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the key tasks and targets for 1996–97 for the NHS Estates agency. [28940]

Mr. Horam: I have today placed in the Library a copy of the key tasks and targets for 1996–97 for the NHS Estates agency.

NHS Pensions Agency

Mr. Robert G. Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the key tasks and targets for 1996–97 for the NHS Pensions Agency. [28941]

Mr. Horam: I have today placed in the Library a copy of the key tasks and targets for 1996–97 for the NHS Pensions Agency.

Deaf-blind People

Mr. Alfred Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many deaf-blind people were resident in the area of each local authority in England and Wales at the latest date for which figures are available; how many local authorities do not currently offer basic rehabilitation and social work support services for deaf-blind people; what action he is taking to improve local provision for them: and if he will make a statement. [27144]

Mr. Bowis: Centrally available information about people registered with local authorities as being blind who are also deaf is published in "Registered Blind and Partially Sighted People at 31 March 1994, England", copies of which are available in the Library.

Information about the number of local authorities that do not currently offer basic rehabilitation and social work support services for deaf-blind people is not available centrally. Under the community care arrangements, local authorities carry out individual assessments of need for people who may need community care services, including those with dual sensory loss. Authorities will need to consider the needs of this client group when drawing up their community care plans.

The Department of Health works closely with the Association of Directors of Social Services to promote awareness of the needs of deaf-blind people. Draft good practice guidelines for older people with dual sensory loss were published in November 1995 and are currently being piloted in selected local authorities. Support is provided under the section 64 general scheme of grants for Sense—the National Deaf-Blind and Rubella Association—and the National Deaf-Blind League, and project grants for Sense, the UK coalition on deaf-blindness, the NDBL and the Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People.

Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine

Mr. Parry: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the present funding of the Liverpool school of tropical medicine. [28086]

Mr. Horam: The Liverpool school of tropical medicine is a registered charity which is part of the University of Liverpool. The hon. Member may wish to contact its director, Professor David Molyneux, for this information.

Long-term Care

Mr French: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if his consultative document on provision for long-term care is ready for publication; and if he will make a statement. [28285]

Mr. Bowis: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced publication of the consultation paper in his oral statement yesterday, *Official Report*, columns 29-40.

Depressive Illnesses

Mr. Matthew Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the cross-departmental studies which have been undertaken into the economic cost of depressive illnesses; what plans he has to commission further studies; and if he will make a statement. [28351]

Mr. Bowis: The Department's policy research programme is currently commissioning research through its mental health research initiative. This includes evaluation of the economic costs of mental disorder, including depressive illness.

Human Embryos

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many human embryos have been made available for artistic research in the last 30 years; what legal authority is required; if the embryos used in the project "Unnatural Selection" at the Barbican centre were obtained under a licence from the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority; and if he will make a statement. [28456]

Mr. Horam: The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1980 exists to regulate the creation and use of embryos for treatment and research purposes. Its licensing function came into operation on 1 August 1991.

The Barbican exhibition is the only event of its kind of which the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority is aware.

I understand that the embryos in question were, prior to the photographs being taken, donated by couples after their treatment cycles. I also understand that the couples involved had given their consent to photographs being taken and for the use of the photographs in the exhibition.

Drug Guidelines

Mr. Rathbone: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidelines of best practice in local drugs health education programmes are being prepared; and when they will be *(a)* completed and *(b)* issued. [27424]

Mr. Robin Squire: I have been asked to reply.

In respect of those innovative drugs education projects supported by the Department for Education and Employment under GEST—grant for education support and training, 16 projects were funded in 1995–96. These are currently being evaluated and the findings will be circulated widely and made available to schools in the summer.

ENVIRONMENT

Homeless Households

Mr. McAvoy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what estimate he has made of the current number of homeless households in England and Wales which *(a)* have been accepted by local authorities, *(b)* are applying to be accepted by local authorities and *(c)* are outside the priority groups and have not applied to a local authority. [27497]

Mr. Clappison: In the quarter ending December 1995, local authorities in England accepted responsibility to secure accommodation for 27,490 households under the homelessness provisions of the Housing Act 1985. At the end of this period there were around 9,000 households in temporary accommodation awaiting the outcome of inquiries into their application for housing under the homelessness legislation.

Households that are outside the priority groups and have not applied to local authorities under the homelessness provisions of the Housing Act 1985 are by definition not generally known to local authorities, nor do we have research information that provides estimates of their numbers.

For information on Wales, I refer the hon. Member to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales.

Castle Cement

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will hold a public inquiry into the matters raised by Castle Cement in its appeal against the Her Majesty's inspectorate of pollution directions concerning the plant at Clitheroe. [27340]

Mr. Clappison: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has informed Castle Cement and the Environment Agency that he intends the appeal case to proceed by means of a public hearing. Details of the hearing will in due course be advertised locally, and interested parties will be able to submit evidence to the Secretary of State's inspector.

Radioactive Waste

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment in what locations and in what quantities *(a)* the Atomic Energy Authority and *(b)* British Nuclear Fuels plc have been discharging radioactive waste into seas and estuaries through outfalls. [27344]

Mr. Clappison: Both the UKAEA and BNFL publish annual discharge reports, which include the location and quantities of discharged radioactive waste into seas and estuaries through outfalls. The most recent of these are *(a)* "Radioactive waste discharges from UKAEA establishments during 1994 and associated monitoring results" and, *(b)* "BNFL annual report on radioactive discharges and monitoring of the environment 1994: Vol 1: report on discharges and environmental monitoring; Vol 2: certificates of authorisation and environmental monitoring programmes". Both reports are available in the House of Commons Library.

Basking Sharks

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will make a statement on his progress towards securing endangered species status for basking sharks. [27558]

Mr. Clappison: The basking shark is currently classified as "insufficiently known" in the International Union for the Conservation of Nature red data list.

The Joint Nature Conservation Committee, the Government's statutory conservation adviser, is currently considering which species should be protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 as part of the third quinquennial review. The commmittee's final recommendations to the Secretary of State are due to be submitted in October 1996; it is too early to say whether the basking shark will be listed.

Housing (Coventry)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what is the financial allocation from his Department to housing associations in Coventry for 1996–97; and what is the estimated figure for 1997–98. [27910]

Mr. Clappison: In 1996–97 the Housing Corporation is allocating £3.6 million housing association grant to housing associations for new social housing schemes in Coventry. In addition, these schemes will make use of other public subsidy valued at £490,000, through discounted land sales by the local authority. Revenue grant of £51,248 is also being allocated for special needs schemes.

Allocation details will be published shortly in the Housing Corporation's regional allocations statements. No firm estimates are available for 1997–98 allocations.

Mr. Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment (1) how many social dwellings in Coventry are in need of repairs *(a)* in real terms and *(b)* as a percentage of the total social housing stock in Coventry; and if he will estimate the cost of such repairs; [27911]

(2) how many households were moved out of social housing in Coventry in 1995 as a result of the state of repair of their homes. [27913]

Mr. Clappison: Local authorities in England are asked to provide estimates of the numbers of their own dwellings and dwellings owned by housing associations in their area in need of renovation on 1 April in their annual housing investment programme HIP1 returns. The estimates given in Coventry's 1995 return were as follows:

	Unfit dwellings	*Dwellings not unfit but in need of renovation*
Local authority		
Number	646	20,393
Proportion of stock	3.1 per cent.	96.9 per cent.
Housing associations		
Number	10	126
Proportion of stock	0.2 per cent.	2.5 per cent.

The figures reported by authorities on the HIP1 return are their own estimates and are not necessarily complied on a consistent basis.

Information is not held centrally on the costs of renovating these dwellings nor on the numbers of households moved out of social housing because of the state of repair of the dwelling.

Mr. Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how many social dwellings in Coventry will be demolished in 1996–97. [27912]

Mr. Clappison: There is a phased programme of demolitions on the Willenhall estate involving 136 local authority owned properties which will commence in 1996–97. These dwellings will be replaced with a mixture of dwellings which will be available for sale, shared ownership and rent. There is no known programme for the demolition of housing association dwellings.

Mr. Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what is the average cost of building a new *(a)* social dwelling and *(b)* specialised social dwelling in Coventry. [27909]

Mr. Clappison: In Coventry the average cost in 1995–96 of a new general needs housing association home, with funding from the Housing Corporation, was £52,800. The average cost of a new special needs housing association home in 1995–96 was £53,700.

Housing Associations

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what was his Department's financial allocation to housing associations in each year since 1990 *(a)* in real terms and *(b)* as a percentage change on the previous year. [27907]

Mr. Clappison: The public resources provided to housing associations through the Housing Corporation's approved development programme and through revenue grants and subsidies since 1990–91 are shown in my Department's annual report for 1996. A copy is in the Library of the House.

In addition, local authorities have provided funding to housing associations for the provision of new social housing.

Projected Housing Requirements

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will make a statement on the projected requirements for new house starts over the next *(a)* 10, *(b)* 15 and *(c)* 20 years; and what methodology is used to determine housing needs by *(a)* county and *(b)* region. [28287]

Sir Paul Beresford: The Department of the Environment's household projections provide estimates of the future number of households by region, county and metropolitan and London boroughs. These are the starting point for developing housing needs requirement figures in regional planning guidance.

Regional conferences of planning authorities consider the revised projections and advise the Secretary of State of the number and distribution. This process has started in a number of regions and will lead to proposals for changing the housing figures in regional planning guidance. Once agreed, the new figures will be tested in alterations to structure plans and unitary development plans and, in turn, in alterations to local plans. Regional planning guidance usually looks ahead 15 years, structure plans 10 to 15 years and unitary development plans and local plans 10 years.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will publish the discussion paper being prepared by his Department on the impact of population trends on housing construction requirements over the next 15 years. [28286]

Sir Paul Beresford: We hope to publish a discussion paper on the latest household projections before the summer recess.

Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre

Mr. Dover: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what plans he has to hand over the operation of the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre to the private sector. [28284]

Sir Paul Beresford: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the chief executive of the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre, Mr. M. C. Buck. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from M. C. Buck to Mr. Den Dover, dated 8 May 1996:

I would refer to your Parliamentary Question, "To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, if he has plans to hand over the operation of the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre to the private sector."

The Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre has been market tested during the last twelve months and the in-house team bid was successful in winning this test.

Environment Secretary John Gummer announced on 13 February 1996 that he had accepted the in-house team bid in a market test of the management of the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre.

In a Parliamentary Written Answer to Nigel Evans MP (Ribble Valley) on the result of the market test, Mr. Gummer said:

"I have now decided to award a five-year service level agreement to the in-house team, based on the existing Executive Agency for the Conference Centre. It will take effect from 1 April 1996. Having considered the advice of the steering group and of consultants, KPMG, I am satisfied that the bid submitted by this team offers better value for money than those received from elsewhere. It also satisfied the quality and the security requirements set for the test".

Village Shops

Mr. Bellingham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when he proposes to consult on the details of the proposed rate relief scheme for village shops; and if he will make a statement. [28842]

Mr. Gummer: I have today published a consultation paper setting out proposals for a new rate relief scheme for village shops. As foreshadowed in the White Paper, "Rural England: A Nation Committed to a Living Countryside", the proposals will help certain small general stores and post offices in rural villages. They mean that such businesses will see a reduction of at least 50 per cent. in their rates bills. Local authorities will be able to top this up to 100 per cent. and, in addition, will be able to grant relief to other rural shops and businesses which are of benefit to the community.

These proposals will provide significant help to small general stores and post offices, which are a feature of village life and which provide an invaluable service to local people who do not have cars or ready access to public transport. They will also give local authorities wide discretion to reduce the rates bills of other rural businesses, thereby helping to safeguard rural communities and preserve the fabric of village life.

Advisory Committee on Packaging

Mr. Anthony Coombs: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what is the role and purpose of the advisory committee on packaging. [28882]

Mr. Gummer: In the answer that I gave to my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) on 7 May, *Official Report,* column *73* I set out some of the background to the Government's decision to follow a shared approach as the basis for regulations which would give effect to the producer responsibility initiative and to the EC directive on packaging and packaging waste. Continuing partnership with industry is critical to success in this area and, following the agreement reached on 15 December, I have asked Sir Peter Parker to chair an advisory committee on packaging comprising some of the senior business representatives most closely involved in this initiative.

The external members of the committee are:

Sir Peter Parker KBE LVO: Chairman

Dr. Bill Cook: British Gas

Mr. Brian Curtis: CarnaudMetal Box—Foodcan UK

Mr. Peter Lipscomb: Guinness plc

Mr. John Longworth: Tesco plc

Mr. John Turner: Coca-Cola Schweppes Beverages

Mr. Keith Stenning: British Polythene Industries plc

Mr. Peter Williams: David S. Smith (Holdings) plc

Mr. Martin van Zwanenberg: Marks & Spencer plc

For its initial work the committee is supported by a technical working group of experts with particular experience of packaging and related issues.

In addition to the work it has already undertaken, the committee will continue to provide guidance on the introduction and implementation of regulations, based on the 15 December agreement, and will advise me, the President of the Board of Trade, the Secretaries of State for Scotland and for Wales, the chairman of the Environment Agency and the chairman of the Scottish Environment Protection Agency.

The committee will advise on the effectiveness of regulations in delivering the EC directive targets and will help to monitor their operation. In particular, it will advise on arrangements for carrying out a review of the legal obligation, in the light of data submitted after the regulations have come into force, including consideration of the actual burden on individual companies.

In carrying out its work, the committee will keep in mind the Government's tests for the approach to legislation as set out in the *Official Report* on 2 February 1995, columns *762–64*, the requirements placed on the Secretary of State by the enabling powers in the Environment Act 1995 and Ministers' emphasis on the desirability of maintaining a consensual approach for the development of an effective business-led initiative for the recovery and recycling of packaging waste in the UK.

I am grateful for the work already carried out by Sir Peter Parker and members of the advisory committee and the supporting technical group. I intend to publish the committee's preliminary advice to accompany the issue of draft regulations for consultation and at appropriate stages in the future.

Commission on Sustainable Development

Ms Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment (1) if he will make a statement on the outcome of the Commission on Sustainable Development meeting in New York between 18 April and 3 May, with particular reference to ocean pollution; [28124]

(2) who represented the United Kingdom Government at the Commission on Sustainable Development meeting in New York between 18 April and 3 May. [28123]

Mr. Gummer *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* I led the United Kingdom's delegation to the fourth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development. As well as my Department, the delegation included officials from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Overseas Development Administration and the Department of Trade and Industry, and representatives from the non-governmental sector and local government. The commission agreed recommendations on a range of topics including oceans, atmosphere, finance, consumption and production, trade and environment and education.

In particular, we were successful in reaching agreement on the need for changes in the international machinery for taking decisions at the global level on the world's oceans so that environmental concerns are fully taken into account, and to promote the sustainable use of marine resources. The international workshop on the oceans which the UK and Brazil governments co-hosted in London last November played a major role in paving the

way for the agreement. We also set in hand preparations for the 1997 special session of the General Assembly, which reviews progress since the Rio earth summit. I emphasised that it was essential that the special session should decide on the key issues which CSD should address in its future work.

I am placing in the Library copies of the chairman's summary of the meeting and of my speech to the session.

TRANSPORT

Vehicle Weight Limits

Ms Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what plans he has to extend the 44-tonnes lorry limit to piggyback wagons; and if he will make a statement; [28553]

(2) what plans he has to extend the 44-tonnes lorry limit to interchange with ports; and if he will make a statement. [28558]

Mr. Norris: We shall consider over the next few months whether to propose any wider use of six-axled lorries with a maximum permitted gross weight of 44 tonnes.

Ms Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to improve enforcement of the 44-tonnes lorry limit; and if he will make a statement. [28560]

Mr. Norris: I am not aware of any problems of enforcement in connection with the present restricted use of the 44-tonnes lorry weight limit, and therefore have no plans to change present arrangements.

Railway Penalty Payments

Ms Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) how much Railtrack has received in penalties from *(a)* South West Trains and *(b)* all other train operating companies in the period 1 February to 31 March; [28551]

(2) how much Railtrack has paid in penalties to *(a)* South West Trains and *(b)* all other train operating companies in the period 1 February to 31 March. [28550]

Mr. Watts: These are commercial matters between Railtrack and the companies concerned.

British Rail Symbol

Mr. Hayes: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on the future use of British Rail's double arrow symbol. [28686]

Mr. Watts: On 7 May British Rail transferred the ownership of the double arrow symbol, and all common law trade marks and rights, to the ownership of the Secretary of State, who will in future license it for use in connection with the Great Britain rail network. Licences will be granted to British Rail, so that the symbol can continue to be used as its corporate logo.

The symbol will also be licensed to Railtrack and to other railway operators where it is to be used to indicate access to the national railway network—for example at stations and on most tickets and on the national railway timetable. The symbol will continue to be used as a traffic sign. Royalties will not be charged.

Minicabs (London)

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what new measures the Government propose to regulate minicabs within Greater London. [28337]

Mr. Norris: In our response to the Transport Select Committee, Cm 2715, the Government agreed in principle with the Committee's recommendation that all private hire vehicles—minicabs—in London should be regulated.

It remains the Government's policy to introduce legislation to this effect when parliamentary time permits.

Business Subsidies

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the grants and loans provided by his Department to businesses, together with the criteria they have to meet in order to obtain the subsidy. [28194]

Mr. Norris *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* The following grants were paid to businesses other than public sector bodies in 1995–96. The main conditions relating to the issue of these grants are contained in the relevant statute.

Grant name	*Statutory authority*
Freight Facilities grant	Railways Act 1993
Industrial Development Act grant	Industrial Development Act 1982

The Department does not provide loans to such businesses.

Civil Engineering Contracts

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what consultations he has had with the director of the Highways Agency concerning the scrapping of the contractor self-certification system for quality assurance on *(a)* bridge steelwork and *(b)* other critical areas on civil engineering contracts. [28398]

Mr. Watts *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* The agency does not recognise self-certification quality assurance, except where there is a requirement-provision in a European standard for self-certification, and requires that an element of second party quality control is implemented on contracts. The agency reserves the right to instigate second-third party quality control procedures on its contracts. There has been no discussion of action to scrap contractor self-certification quality assurance, but where a third party quality assurance scheme is introduced this will effectively supersede any self-certification that may exist in the area.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Office Space

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the square footage and cost of office space rented by his Department and its agencies and the number of his Department or agencies' buildings partly or fully unoccupied together with the square footage of that

unoccupied office space and its estimated rental value where available in each of the past five financial years. [27725]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: The information shows the area and rental cost of the LCD estate for the period requested. The figures available are shown in square metres rather than square feet and represent the agents lettable area of the building rather than the whole building.

	Square metres	£
1991–92	616,790	64,314,423
1992–93	632,181	69,451,866
1993–94	663,871	77,575,962
1994–95	668,295	79,268,717
1995–96	629,087	69,324,056
1996–97	45,948	9,184,904

The LCD Estate includes the Public Trust Office and the Court Service estate, with the exception of the figures for 1996–97 which exclude accommodation covered by the Court Service following agency status. The chief executive of the Court Service will respond separately in respect of that period. The chief executives of Her Majesty's Land Registry and the Public Record Office will also reply separately.

The estate occupied by the Lord Chancellor's Department and its agencies has many types of building: offices, courts, residential properties, storage facilities and offices converted into courtrooms. The majority of the buildings have a combination of uses and our records, prior to the current year, do not distinguish between the different types. For the current year, the LCD HQ estate has a total of 1,783 sq m of vacant office space, which is encompassed in an overall review of office space currently being undertaken. The vacant space has an approximate rental value of £286,275.

Letter from M. D. Huebner to Mrs. Bridget Prentice, dated 8 May 1996:

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department has asked me to reply to your Question about rented office space on the Court Service estate. As you know, the Court Service was established as an Executive Agency of the Lord Chancellor's Department in April 1995 and it is, therefore, only possible to supply figures from that date.

The approximate area of the Court Service estate is 6,771,430 square feet. This figure represents the entire agency estate and includes courtrooms, office accommodation, judges' lodgings, storage space etc. It would only be possible to obtain the percentage of office space in this figure at disproportionate cost. The rental value of the estate for the financial year 1995/96 was approximately £69,342,056. This figure includes actual rent paid on leasehold properties and nominal rent paid on freehold properties held on the Common User Estate. As both types of rent were paid to the Department of the Environment it is not possible to identify what amount relates solely to leasehold properties.

The Court Service does not keep comprehensive financial records for empty office space on the estate and the information required could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Letter from John Manthorpe to Mrs. Bridget Prentice, dated 8 May 1996:

I have been asked by the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, to reply to your recent question on rented office space.

The square footage of office space rented by H M Land Registry at 31 March 1996 was 770,649 sq. ft at a cost of £4,646,813. The details of square footage and cost of unoccupied leasehold office space over the past five financial years is as follows:

Year	*Space—sq. ft*	*Rent £*	*Number of buildings*
1991–92	—	—	—
1992–93	11,480	127,634	Part only of one building
1993–94	19,002	204,587	Parts only of two buildings
1994–95	19,002	221,729	Parts only of two buildings
1995–96	32,657	305,559	One entire building and parts only of two buildings

Surplus accommodation has arisen in the Land Registry following reductions in its staff of some 3,400 from the 1989–90 peak. Disposals of 297,105 square feet of rented accommodation have taken place since 1989 and further major disposals are being negotiated.

Letter from Duncan Simpson to Mrs. Bridget Prentice, dated 8 May 1996:

In the absence of the Chief Executive, who is away from the Office on official business, I have been asked by the Lord Chancellor's Parliamentary Secretary to reply for the Public Record Office to your question about rented and unoccupied office space.

The Public Record Office rented no office space in the commercial property market in the past five financial years.

The Public Record Office's buildings form part of the Common User Estate and are primarily devoted to storing the public records. Office space within them over the past five financial years was about 177,540 square feet. The rental for office space, paid through the Property Repayment Service System, was:

1991–92: £1,170,880

1992–93: £1,424,896

1993–94: £1,403,981

1994–95: £1,305,736

1995–96: £1,274,621.

None of the Office's buildings has been partly or fully unoccupied over the past five financial years.

Doncaster Crown Court

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how long on average elapses between the date of a person being charged with an offence and the date of *(a)* arraignment and *(b)* conclusion of case at Doncaster Crown court for each of the main categories of serious crime. [27633]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: The question concerns a specific operational matter on which the chief executive of the Court Service is best placed to provide an answer and I have accordingly asked him to reply direct.

Letter from M. D. Huebner to Mr. Martin Redmond, dated 8 May 1996:

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, has asked me to reply to your question about the average duration of criminal proceedings at Doncaster Crown Court. In preparing my reply, I have liaised with colleagues the Lord Chancellor's Department who are responsible for proceedings in the magistrates courts.

The average period between the date on which an offence takes place and the case being committed to Doncaster Crown Court by the magistrates court from 1994 to the present is 26.1 weeks. The figure is based on a survey done in three sample weeks each year and the number of cases on which the average is based is 39.

The average period from committal to arraignment or start of trial at Doncaster Crown Court in 1995 was 17.9 weeks. You asked for figures relating to the most serious cases. Doncaster does not however deal with the most serious offences, such as murder, which are instead committed to Leeds Crown Court. Figures for individual offences are not available in any event and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Doncaster Magistrates Court

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the chief inspector of magistrates court services last conducted an inspection into the efficiency of the Doncaster court; when the court will be next inspected; what assessment she made of the efficiency of the Doncaster court; and if he will send the hon. Member a copy of the report on the latest and all subsequent inspections. [27636]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: HM magistrates courts service inspectorate was established in January 1993 to inspect and report to the Lord Chancellor on the administration and organisation of all the magistrates courts committees in England and Wales, and is currently undertaking its first cycle of inspections. Doncaster MCC will be inspected, on dates yet to be arranged, between April 1997 and December 1998, with a post-inspection review to follow no later than 18 months from the end of the inspection. The hon. Member will receive a copy of the inspection report, once published.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Crown Prosecution Service

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Attorney-General what plans he has to reduce the budget of the Crown Prosecution Service; and if he will make a statement. [28233]

The Attorney-General: The budget for the Crown Prosecution Service agreed in the 1995 public expenditure survey is, in cash terms, in 1996–97 and in the following two years, £288 million, £286 million and £286 million respectively. Future spending plans will be the subject of discussion in this year's survey.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Lebanon

18. **Mr. Burden:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the prospects for peace in the Lebanon. [27210]

21. **Mr. Connarty:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is his policy on the present attacks in Lebanon by Israel. [27214]

Mr. Hanley: I refer the hon. Members to the oral answer given in the House earlier today by my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary.

China

19. **Mr. Robert Ainsworth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on Britain's relations with China. [27211]

Mr. Rifkind: Our relationship with China is of great importance, particularly because of our shared interest in the successful transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong next year.

27. **Mr. Pawsey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Chinese authorities about strengthening trade relations after the transfer of Hong Kong. [27220]

Mr. Hanley: My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary had wide-ranging discussions with Chinese leaders during his visit to China in January, and with the Chinese Foreign Minister in The Hague on 20 April.

EU Institutions

20. **Mr. Clelland:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what proposals he has to increase the involvement of national parliaments in decision-making in EC institutions. [27212]

Mr. David Davis: We are looking at a number of proposals to increase the involvement of national parliaments in the European Union, such as a minimum period for documents and in particular draft legislation to be available for parliamentary scrutiny before these are discussed in the Council, and written Council reports to national parliaments on justice and home affairs and common foreign and security policy.

29. **Mr. Jim Marshall:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his proposals for reforming the institutions of the European Union. [27222]

Mr. Davis: We have set out our approach to the IGC on many occasions, and notably in the White Paper, "A Partnership of Nations", which was debated on 21 March.

Intergovernmental Conference

30. **Mr. Wareing:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which EU member states attending the intergovernmental conference are supporting the United Kingdom Government's opposition to a further extension of qualified majority voting. [27224]

Mr. David Davis: Most other member states support some extension of qualified majority voting. However, they do not all agree where specifically it should apply. Some link extension to other issues, such as EC payment for policies which may be foisted upon them in consequence—for example, in the environmental area—and reweighting of votes. The position is therefore complex and will no doubt develop as the negotiations continue.

25. **Mr. O'Hara:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he will meet the new Italian Prime Minister to discuss the Italian presidency of the intergovernmental conference. [27218]

Mr. Davis: My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary expects to meet the new Italian Prime Minister soon after he has been sworn in.

28. **Mr. Salmond:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will report on the progress of the intergovernmental conference. [27221]

Mr. Davis: The second ministerial session of the IGC took place on 22 April. There have been six working group sessions to date. The next ministerial session is on 13 May.

Western Sahara

22. **Mr. Hutton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on Her Majesty's Government's policy on the future of Western Sahara. [27215]

Mr. Hanley: We continue to believe it essential that Morocco and Polisario co-operate fully with the UN operation in the Western Sahara. We await the Secretary-General's full report on 15 May.

Land Mines

23. **Mr. Mullin:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent undertakings he has given about United Kingdom policy on land mines; and if he will make a statement. [27216]

36. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he has taken to achieve an international ban on the sale and production of land mines. [27230]

Mr. David Davis: I set out recent changes to UK policy in my written answer to the hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) on 23 April, *Official Report*, column *84*.

Commercial Sections

24. **Mr. Barry Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the role of commercial sections in assisting British manufacturing industry in north American markets. [27217]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: Commercial staff at posts throughout north America provide a large range of services to support British manufacturing and other industries.

Iraq (UN Sanctions)

26. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on UN sanctions on Iraq. [27219]

Mr. Hanley: The purpose of sanctions is to ensure that Iraq complies with its obligations under relevant UN Security Council resolutions. Iraq remains a long way from compliance. UN Security Council resolution 986 is intended to alleviate the suffering of the Iraq people. We hope that the current discussions will succeed and that Iraq will implement the resolution.

Brazil

31. **Mr. Jacques Arnold:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on relations with Brazil. [27225]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: Relations remain excellent, particularly on the economic front, and continue to improve. My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary had a most successful visit to Brazil in April.

EU Enlargement

32. **Mr. Betts:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the prospects for enlargement of the European Union. [27226]

Mr. David Davis: Britain wants enlargement to take place as soon as the candidates are ready to join. We are working hard to create the conditions in which enlargement can take place successfully.

Middle East Peace Process

33. **Mr. Bill Michie:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received concerning the middle east peace process. [27227]

Mr. Hanley: I refer the hon. Member to the oral answer given in the House earlier today by my right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary.

Gibraltar

34. **Mr. Steen:** To ask the Secretary of the State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he plans next to visit Madrid to discuss the cross-border enforcement of European rules and regulations. [27228]

Mr. David Davis: My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary hopes to meet his new Spanish opposite number at the earliest opportunity to discuss a wide range of issues.

UN Commission on Human Rights

35. **Mrs. Ewing:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what were the conclusions of the 52nd session of the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva; and if he will make a statement on the policy of Her Majesty's Government on each of the conclusions. [27229]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: The UN Commission on Human Rights adopted more than 100 resolutions and decisions on human rights thematic subjects and individual country situations. Voting details of the United Kingdom and other Commission members are contained in UN reports, copies of which will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

Diplomatic Missions

Mr. Harry Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many additional diplomatic missions have been established in the region of the former Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia; at what cost; and if he will make a statement. [27412]

Mr. Hanley: Between 1991 and 1995, 13 additional diplomatic missions were opened in the former Soviet Union, including one trade office, and four in the former Yugoslavia. The latest detailed cost figures available are for 1994–95. The cost of nine of the 13 missions in the FSU in that year was £5,646,352. The remaining four were opened since 1994–95. The costs of the missions in former Yugoslavia in 1994–95 were £2,245,698. All of this expenditure was covered by redeployment of existing resources.

United Nations (Budget Deficit)

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with officials of the United Nations and the United States about the UN budget deficit. [28242]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: We are in close and regular contact with both partners in the UN and with UN officials. A package of measures, including UK proposals for reform of the UN's scales of assessment, has been adopted by the EU and put forward in UN discussions.

Mr. Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the UN budget deficit. [28243]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: In a recent update of his forecast of the UN financial situation for the rest of the year, Under Secretary-General Joseph Connor predicted an overall positive cash balance of $388 million for the end of 1996. In the meantime, pending receipts of arrears promised for the autumn, it will, however, be necessary for the UN to cross-borrow again from its peacekeeping accounts to finance regular budget activities.

European Parliament

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions have taken place at the intergovernmental conference on the powers of the European Parliament. [27203]

Mr. David Davis: The IGC working group discussed the powers of the European Parliament on 22–23 April.

Saudi Arabia

Lady Olga Maitland: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on United Kingdom relations with Saudi Arabia. [27213]

Mr. Hanley: Saudi Arabia is a country of great importance to the stability of the middle east and to the economic prosperity of the UK and the industrialised world. I believe that our relations are excellent.

Kashmir

Mr. Madden: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Government of India over the International Committee of the Red Cross being required to withdraw from Indian-occupied Kashmir. [28441]

Mr. Hanley *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* We understand that the ICRE is now operating, at its own suggestion, a reduced programme in Kashmir for the duration of the election period.

Mr. Madden: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Government of India calling for an investigation into the killing of the chairman of the Kashmir Commission of Justice. [28449]

Mr. Hanley *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* Our high commission in New Delhi has raised our concern at Mr. Andrabi's death with the Indian authorities on a number of occasions and has pressed for an inquiry. We understand that the Jammu and Kashmir high court has ordered a police investigation into the circumstances surrounding Mr. Andrabi's death. The Indian National Human Rights Commission has also announced an investigation.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Nursery Voucher Scheme

Mr. Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans she has to allow nursery vouchers to be redeemed in respect of provision during school holidays. [28084]

Mr. Robin Squire: The voucher will cover a minimum of 36 weeks spread over three terms. In maintained schools it will cover the full school term. Where providers in the private and voluntary sectors do not operate termly, it is intended that from September 1996 the voucher should cover broadly equivalent termly periods. Beyond the minimum of 36 weeks, providers can offer additional service, but parents will be expected to meet the cost.

Mr. Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many applications for nursery vouchers she has received from providers on behalf of parents of four-year-olds in the pilot authorities, who had not applied for a voucher before term began. [28085]

Mr. Squire: Seven such applications have been received.

Mr. Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to her answer of 22 April, *Official Report,* column *48,* how many places are available for voucher-bearing four-year-olds in *(a)* the private and voluntary sector providers and *(b)* the maintained sector providers that have been initially validated. [28087]

Mr. Squire: All maintained schools in the phase one local education authorities have been initially validated. The estimated number of places available for four-year-olds in the maintained sector as at January 1995 is given in the following table. The number of places in the private and voluntary sectors taken up by voucher-bearing four-year-olds will be available once the voucher returns have been analysed.

LEA	*Estimated number of four-year-olds in maintained provision at January 1995*
Kensington and Chelsea	800
Wandsworth	2,600
Westminster	1,100
Norfolk	6,300

Mr. Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to her answer of 22 April, *Official Report* column *48*, how many of the 40 providers that have been initially validated, but did not have any four-year-olds on the roll at the time of registration are in (i) the maintained sector, (ii) the voluntary sector and (iii) the private sector; and how many places for voucher-bearing four-year-olds are being offered by each category. [28133]

Mr. Squire: The 40 providers referred to in the earlier answer are all from the private and voluntary sectors. It is not possible to differentiate between private and voluntary sector providers. Information on the number of places provided will be available once vouchers returned from providers have been analysed.

Access to Work

Mr. Nigel Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Eduction and Employment if she will make a statement on the help to be made available from the access to work programme to disabled people who are self-employed. [28881]

Mr. Paice: In her statement on 26 March, *Official Report*, column *489*, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced an increase in the budget and operational arrangements for the access to work programme in 1996–97. She also said that particular factors applied in the case of the self-employed, and that the help to be provided to them would be considered further.

From 1 June, access to work will meet up to 90 per cent. of approved costs over a threshold of £100 per year for all new applications. This means that a greater proportion of costs will be met than for employees generally. The programme will also provide 100 per cent. of all approved costs in excess of £10,000 over three years. In addition to this, existing commitments for the self-employed will continue to be met for a transitional period of three years.

All other arrangements will be in line with the announcement made on 26 March.

Business Subsidies

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will list the grants and loans provided by her Department to businesses, together with the criteria they have to meet in order to obtain the subsidy. [28187]

Mr. Paice *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* The Department has a number of initiatives aimed directly at employers of all sizes. These provide financial assistance, some of which is matched by employers' own contributions, to achieve a variety of business objectives. The initiatives, together with the source of the published criteria are listed as follows:

Initiative	*Eligible firms*	*Published criteria*
Employer investment in people programme	all firms	TEC operating agreement (copy in Library)
Skills for small businesses	under 50 employees	TEC operating agreement
Small firms training loans	up to 50 employees	Small firms training loans booklet
Skills challenge	under 200 employees	Skills challenge prospectus

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Office Space

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will list the square footage and cost of office space rented by his Department and its agencies and the number of his Department or agencies' buildings partly or fully unoccupied together with the square footage of that unoccupied office space and its estimated rental value where available in each of the past five financial years. [27720]

Mr. John M. Taylor: Prior to 1 April 1996, Property Holdings—part of the Department of the Environment—was responsible for the vast majority of office space, including any vacant space, rented as part of the Government's civil estate. Retrospective information on the past five years is therefore not readily available and could not be obtained except at disproportionate cost.

Within my Department, management of property is now delegated to a series of property centres to maximise synergy with business operations. Rent, rates and service charges for office accommodation rented by DTI headquarters' property centres are forecast to cost £36 million in 1996–97 in respect of 1,257,000 sq. ft. Of this area, 24,000 sq. ft. or 2 per cent., in two partly occupied buildings, is empty and available for sub-letting, with an associated pro rata rent of £0.26 million. Identical information for agencies is not yet readily available except at disproportionate cost.

Taiwanese Companies

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will list each Taiwanese company that has invested in the United Kingdom over the last 10 years, indicating the date and location of investment; and if he will make a statement. [27902]

Mr. Oppenehiem: The information is as follows:

Name	*Date*	*Location*
Lite-On	1991	Ashington, Northumberland
Synpac Pharmaceuticals Ltd.	1991	Bedlington, Northumberland
Europa Magnetics Corporation	1993	Cramlington, Northumberland
Ringtel Electronics (UK) Ltd.	1995	Cwmbran, Wales
Mitac Europe Ltd.	1988	Telford, Shropshire
Enta Technologies	1990	Telford, Shropshire
Teco Electric Europe	1993	Trafford Park, Manchester
Wan Hai Steamship Co.	1990	Chorley, Lancashire
William and Jones	1995	South Liverpool
Chunghwa Picture Tubes Co. Ltd.	1995	Lanarkshire, Scotland
Chicony	1995	Greenock, Scotland
Hon Hai Precision Co. Ltd.	1995	Erskine, Scotland

To our knowledge, 12 of the 15 Taiwanese companies manufacturing in Europe are in the UK. Many of these companies have expanded their operations since their first investment, demonstrating the excellence of the UK as a base for overseas investment.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many people are employed by companies from Taiwan in *(a)* England, *(b)* Wales, *(c)* Scotland, *(d)* Northern Ireland and *(e)* the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [27944]

Mr. Oppenheim: The numbers of people employed by Taiwanese manufacturing companies in the UK are as follows:

England:	2,010
Wales:	100
Scotland:	60
Northern Ireland:	0

The figure for Scotland is likely to increase by 3,300 jobs within the next three years due to the recent Chunghwa Picture Tubes investment.

Her Majesty's Government welcome inward investment from Taiwan. We firmly believe that the UK remains the ideal base for Taiwanese and other overseas investors to tackle the wider European market. Our outstanding record of attracting inward investment from all over the world bears this out.

Computers

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on the outcome of his Department's survey of the effect of the turn of the century on the computers of United Kingdom organisations; what is his assessment of the availability of skills required to respond to the problem and the cost concerned; and what action is being taken to alert and help businesses of all sizes. [27921]

Mr. Ian Taylor: The survey revealed a high level of awareness amongst IT directors of organisations. The technical skills required are not demanding, but the scale of an organisation's problem can be reliably assessed only if an audit is carried out. The cost of fixing the problem depends on the size and age of an organisation's software portfolio. My Department will provide information on our world wide web site, and through the business links, and will be persuading senior management to take the problem seriously. There is time to deal with it if tackled now. The longer it is left, the higher the likely cost of remedial work. I am urging all chief executives to discover now for themselves the extent of the problem in their companies.

Personal Injury Insurance Compensation

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what measures he proposes to reduce the time personal injury insurance compensation takes to be processed. [27905]

Mr. Nelson: This is a matter primarily for the insurance industry. The Association of British Insurers, the industry's principal trade association, has a code of practice which requires member insurers to settle valid claims without delay.

Not only is it in policyholders' interests for claims to be dealt with swiftly, it is also in the interest of insurers. By settling claims quickly they reduce their administrative costs. Failure to do so will encourage customers to turn to insurers offering a better service.

Some claim disputes cannot be resolved other than by a legal action. Lord Woolf has already published an interim report addressing cost, delay and complexity associated with the civil justice system. He is due to publish a final report in July this year.

Business Links

Mr. Harvey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will list for each business link *(a)* its location and *(b)* the number of staff employed. [28533]

Mr. Page: I am placing a list of business link addresses in the Library of the House.

Business links are partnerships involving all the main business support organisations. As such, their services are provided by staff who are employed by those organisations but co-located in or seconded to the business links, as well as by staff who are directly employed by the business link itself. There is no central record of the numbers of staff employed in each business link and the information could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many DTI civil servants are currently employed in the business links. [28537]

Mr. Page: A total of 107 DTI staff are currently co-located in business links.

Mrs. Roche: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many civil servants from his Department have been seconded to business links; and where each of them is currently situated. [28154]

Mr. Page *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* A total of 107 DTI staff were co-located in business links on 1 May 1996. They are located as follows:

	Number
Abingdon	1
Aykley Heads	2
Barnsley	2
Barrow in Furness	1
Birkenhead	1
Birmingham	6
Blyth	2
Bradford	1
Brighouse	1
Burgess Hill	2
Cannock	2
Carlisle	1
Chelmsford	1
Chester	1
Chesterfield	2
Coventry	4
Derby	2
Dudley	2
Edwinstowe	3
Fareham	1
Gateshead	3
Histon	1
Ipswich	1
Leeds	1
Leicester	3
Lincoln	2
Liverpool	2
Luton	1
Manchester	5
Middlesborough	3
Newport	1
Northampton	2
Nottingham	2
Oxford	1
Peterborough	1
Plymouth	2
Poole	2
Redditch	1
Redruth	2
Rotherham	1
Sandwell	2
Sheffield	1
Slough	2
Solihull	1
St. Helens	1
St. Albans	1
Stoke on Trent	3
Sunderland	3
Telford	3
Wakefield	1
Walsall	2
West Malling	2
Wigan	3
Woking	2
Wolverhampton	1
Worcester	3
Wyre Forest	1

Yugoslavia

Mr. Wareing: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what contacts his Department has had with Belgrade with a view to promoting British trading interests since the official recognition of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. [27968]

Mr. Nelson *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was recognised officially on 9 April, but my Department began promoting actively British interest in the market on 22 November, when UN trade sanctions were suspended. Officials had discussions on promoting UK-Federal Republic of Yugoslavia trade with senior ministers in Belgrade in December. My Department has prepared information on the market which it sends out to interested companies; it also worked closely with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in arranging the mission of senior business executives which my hon. Friend the Minister of State at the Foreign Office led to Belgrade in February. A trade mission from Montenegro will be visiting the UK in July and there are plans for a major event in London to promote trade with the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In taking such measures, and others, to promote British interests my Department has been working closely with the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia embassy in London and the British embassy in Belgrade.

Research Establishments

Mr. Ingram: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what conclusions he has reached on the first tranche of public sector research establishments being considered under the prior options review. [28259]

Mr. Ian Taylor *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* The Government are currently considering the outcome of these reviews and conclusions will be announced as soon as possible.

Defence Exports (China)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what *(a)* strategic and *(b)* regulatory considerations are taken into account in deciding whether to grant a licence for the export of airborne early warning sensors and scanners to China. [27371]

Mr. Oppenheim *[holding answer 30 April 1996]:* Export licences are considered on a case-by-case basis in the light of our national and international commitments.

Since 7 June 1989, the UK has enforced an EU embargo on the sale to China of "weapons and equipment which could be used for internal repression". The current embargo guidelines were announced by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, on 4 April 1995, *Official Report*, column *979*.

Those defence and defence-related goods requiring an export licence are listed in the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, as amended.

PRIME MINISTER

Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy

Sir Ralph Howell: To ask the Prime Minister what evidence he has evaluated proving a link between BSE and *(a)* Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease and *(b)* other human diseases. [28542]

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health made a statement on 20 March, *Official Report*, columns 375–76, relating to the expert scientific advice received from the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee about the previously unrecognised form of CJD. SEAC's advice is that, although there is no direct evidence of a link, on current data and in the absence of any credible alternative, the most likely explanation at present is that these cases are linked to exposure to BSE before the introduction of the specified bovine offals ban in 1989. The findings of the national CJD surveillance unit, on which that advice was based, have since been published in *The Lancet* of 6 April 1996.

We have not yet received any advice to suggest that BSE might be linked to other human diseases.

OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION

Hong Kong (Overseas Public Servants) Act

Mr. Coe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what arrangements have been made in respect of new expenditure under the Hong Kong (Overseas Public Servants) Act 1996. [28911]

Mr. Hanley: The Hong Kong (Overseas Public Servants) Act 1996, which received Royal Assent in February, provides for a compensation and pension package involving compensation and resettlement payments to Hong Kong overseas civil service officers.

Parliamentary approval of this new expenditure is being sought in the 1996–97 main estimate for ODA's overseas superannuation vote, class II, vote 6. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £3 million is being met by a repayable advance from the contingency fund.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Metropolitan Police

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Metropolitan police officers were *(a)* prosecuted and *(b)* disciplined in each of the last five years arising from cases where awards of damages or out-of-court settlements had been made; and in cases where officers were disciplined what form the discipline took. [27154]

Mr. Maclean: The figures given are for cases where disciplinary action was taken and where the civil action or settlement was over £10.000. The figures for 1991 and 1992 do not include cases where informal disciplinary action only was taken.

Year	*Cases*		*Action*	*Penalty*
1992	Case 1	1 officer	Substantiated by Police Complaint Authority Tribunal	Reprimanded
	Case 2	7 officers	Formal discipline	Dismissed
	Case 3	1 officer	Formal discipline following a criminal conviction	Dismissed
		1 officer	Informal discipline	Words of advice following an acquittal
		1 officer	Informal discipline	Word of advice
1993	Case 1	1 officer	Formal discipline	Fined
		1 officer	Formal discipline	Cautioned
1994	Case 1	1 officer	Informal discipline	Admonished/ words of advice
	Case 2	1 officer	Informal discipline	Admonished/ words of advice
1995	Case 1	3 officers	Informal discipline	Strictly admonished
		1 officer	No action as he had already left the service	
	Case 2	2 officers	Acquitted of criminal charges	Not yet settled

In addition there were two further cases which, although it cannot be confirmed from the available information, appear to relate to civil actions involving payments of over £10,000. Each case involved an officer who was subject to informal discipline and given words of advice or admonished.

Legal Actions

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the cost to his Department of each legal case against the Department since 23 May 1993 where the case has *(a)* been judged against his Department and *(b)* settled before court judgment; and if he will make a statement. [27559]

Mr. Howard: It is estimated that since 23 May 1993 there have been over 4,000 legal cases against the Home Office, including applications for judicial review and

claims for personal injuries. No central record is kept of the outcome of these cases and it is not therefore possible to provide the information in the form requested.

Metropolitan Police (Racial Discrimination)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many instances of racial discrimination in employment in the Metropolitan police service were dealt with under their disciplinary procedures in *(a)* 1994–95 and *(b)* 1995–96 and with what outcomes, broken down by ethnic origin of alleged victim and perpetrator; [27871]

(2) what was the total number of complaints of racial discrimination in *(a)* employment made by police officers against the Metropolitan police service in 1994–95 and 1995–96; *(b)* and how many were dealt with and disposed of at (i) the informal stage, (ii) following a formal complaint under the internal grievance procedure and (iii) following an application to an industrial tribunal indicating for (i) to (iii) (1) the types of complaint, (2) their outcomes including the terms of any settlements and disciplinary action taken and (3) the time taken to deal with them from receipt to disposal, broken down by (A) gender and (B) ethnic origin of complainant. [27870]

Mr. Maclean: I understand from the commissioner that there are no instances of racial discrimination in employment in the Metropolitan police recorded by the complaints investigation bureau or personnel management branch between 1994 and the present. The commissioner informs me that there were 17 allegations of race discrimination dealt with under the Metropolitan police internal grievance procedure in 1994, one in 1995 and none so far in 1996. The informal stage of this procedure was not introduced until 1 April 1996. All these allegations were made by male officers. The results of such cases were not recorded centrally until 1995. The one case for that year was resolved, but, in accordance with the grievance procedure, results are confidential. The ethnic origin of the complainant, the types of complaint made and the time taken to deal with these complaints are not recorded centrally, although the Metropolitan police sets a standard for dealing with all grievance procedure within seven weeks.

As regards cases taken to industrial tribunal, there are no figures available for 1994. Since 1995, there have been 15 cases which involved an allegation of racial discrimination within the Metropolitan police. Of these, two were withdrawn and two have been settled, the details of which are confidential. The remaining 11 are still to be resolved. Six of the complainants were female and nine male. The ethnic origin of the complainant, the time taken to deal with the cases and the types of allegations are not recorded centrally.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made to date by the Metropolitan police service in implementing the equal opportunities strategy developed in 1994. [27872]

Mr. Maclean: I understand from the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis that results so far include the creation of a positive action team within the Metropolitan police's personnel department, which concentrates on boosting recruitment from ethnic minorities; more recruitment advertising in minority press; regular meetings between police and representatives of minority groups; the inclusion of equal opportunities issues in all management development training courses; and the introduction of a new grievance procedure. A steering committee chaired by the Metropolitan police's director of personnel oversees these initiatives, and a revised equal opportunities statement will be published shortly by the Commissioner.

Electro-shock Equipment

Mrs. Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many licences have been issued by his Department for the handling, storage, distribution or manufacture of electro-shock devices to *(a)* companies or *(b)* individuals; and if he will list the companies involved. [27718]

Mr. Maclean: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to a question from the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Mrs. Clwyd) on 28 March at column *678*.

Remand Prisoners

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of prisoners held on remand have received custodial sentences in each of the last five years. [28110]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Butler to Mr. Ian Pearson, dated 8 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question about the proportion of prisoners held on remand who have received custodial sentences in each of the last five years.

The available information on the proportion of remand prisoners in England and Wales subsequently receiving a custodial sentence is given in successive volumes of 'Prison statistics England and Wales' (Table 2.6 of the 1994 edition, Cm 3087), copies of which are in the Library. Information for 1995 is not yet available.

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the cost of remand prisoners to the Prison Service in each of the last five years. [28112]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Butler to Mr. Ian Pearson, dated 8 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question about the cost of remand prisoners to the Prison Service in each of the last five years.

Information is not available in the form requested as it is not possible to distinguish the cost of keeping different types of offender in custody when held within the same establishment.

The average number of untried, unconvicted and unsentenced prisoners held in custody over the last five years is:

1991–92: 10,630

1992–93: 9,862

1993–94: 11,235

1994–95: 12,361

1995–96: 11,200

The net operating cost per prisoner per year over the same period is:

1991–92: £23,047

1992–93: £25,759

1993–94: £21,587

1994–95: £22,128

1995–96: Not yet available

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the number of prisoners held on remand, by region, in each of the last five years. [28107]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Butler to Mr. Ian Pearson, dated 8 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question about the number of prisoners held on remand, by region, in each of the last five years.

The requested information is given in the attached table.

Average population[1] of remand prisoners in Prison Service establishments in England and Wales by county, 1991–1995

County	1995	1994	1993	1992	1991
Avon	257	283	226	172	181
Bedfordshire	151	174	132	127	151
Berkshire	128	132	133	111	161
Buckinghamshire	283	294	240	49	0
Cambridgeshire	0	1	0	0	0
Cheshire	116	130	130	58	67
Cleveland	220	227	254	106	0
Cumbria	0	0	0	0	0
Derbyshire	0	0	0	0	0
Devon	226	249	209	209	219
Dorset	116	127	102	118	133
Durham	453	513	478	506	573
East Sussex	199	203	193	212	274
Essex	211	233	201	220	251
Gloucestershire	135	151	116	93	108
Greater Manchester	581	485	275	301	200
Gwent	9	0	0	0	0
Hampshire	219	178	148	193	254
Hereford and Worcester	282	311	114	0	202
Hertfordshire	0	0	0	0	0
Humberside	328	443	408	270	341
Isle of Wight	16	16	10	6	5
Kent	390	441	376	367	373
Lancashire	689	751	717	507	542
Leicestershire	597	639	511	455	413
Lincolnshire	249	312	317	308	295
London	2,228	2,411	2,093	2,259	2,474
Merseyside	469	536	663	464	422
Norfolk	189	257	204	194	221
North Yorkshire	119	122	27	1	0
Northamptonshire	0	0	0	0	0
Northumberland	0	0	0	0	0
Nottinghamshire	0	0	0	0	0
Oxfordshire	143	154	124	98	0
Shropshire	149	202	218	170	229
Somerset	0	0	0	0	0
South Glamorgan	280	274	221	179	171
South Yorkshire	506	494	364	363	123
Staffordshire	260	264	239	216	29
Suffolk	0	0	0	0	0
Surrey	178	203	179	45	25
Warwickshire	0	0	0	0	0
West Glamorgan	165	160	176	148	146
West Midlands	278	286	369	413	402
West Sussex	0	0	0	0	0
West Yorkshire	487	576	489	433	494
Wiltshire	0	0	0	0	0
Total[2]	11,306	12,228	10,660	9,374	9,474

[1] Excludes persons held in police cells.
[2] The components may not add to totals because they have been rounded independently.

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the current rate of suicides among *(a)* remand prisoners and *(b)* the rest of the prison population. [28111]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Butler to Mr. Ian Pearson, dated 8 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question about the current rate of suicides among remand prisoners and the rest of the prison population.

The number of self-inflicted deaths to date in 1996 is 25. Twelve of these were deaths of sentenced prisoners and thirteen were prisoners on remand. The inquests have not yet taken place into any of these deaths and I am therefore unable to confirm any verdicts.

Life Prisoners (Personal Possessions)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the personal possessions that a prison inmate, serving a life sentence in a prison in England or Wales, is allowed to have in the cell; and if he will make a statement. [27957]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Butler to Mr. Tom Cox, dated 8 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question about the personal possessions that life sentence prisoners are allowed to have in their cells.

The personal possessions that prisoners, including those serving life sentences, are allowed to have in their cells varies between establishments and are listed in each prison's published statement of facilities. Prison Standing Orders specify a number of personal

items which prisoners may have in their possessions, which can be added to at the governor's discretion. The type of items permitted are determined by considerations such as security; health and safety; and by how appropriate they are to the custodial sentence the prisoner is serving.

The overall amount of property prisoners are allowed in their cells is subject to volumetric controls, currently being introduced in all prisons in England and Wales.

Prisoners (Education and Training)

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many hours of education and training were available to prisoners at Highpoint gaol in the last full year for which figures are available. [27941]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Butler to Mrs. Anne Campbell, dated 8 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question about the hours of education and training available to prisoners at Highpoint prison.

The number of hours available to prisoners for education and training at Highpoint prison, from 1 March 1995 to 29 February, 1996, was 16,061 hours for education and 8,096 hours for training.

Mr. Norman Manning

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the current position with regard to *(a)* the Prison Service investigation and *(b)* the investigation of the chief officer of the West Mercia constabulary into the death of Mr. Norman Manning in Long Lartin prison on 29 September 1994; when he expects these investigations to be concluded; if the reports will be made public; and if he will make a statement. [28142]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Butler to Mr. Harry Cohen, dated 8 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question about the investigations by the Prison Service and the West Mercia Constabulary into the death of Mr. Norman Manning in Long Lartin prison on 29 September 1994.

The Prison Service investigation has been concluded and no evidence was found to indicate that procedures had failed to meet the need to care for Mr. Manning. After enquiries by the West Mercia Constabulary, two prisoners have been charged with the murder of Mr. Manning. Until the court case is resolved the reports will not be made public.

Reconviction Rates

Mr. Michael: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what percentage of offenders are *(a)* convicted of further offences during the two-year period following the completion of the custodial section of prison sentences and *(b)* convicted of further offences which were committed during the two-year period following the completion of the custodial section of prison sentences. [27611]

Miss Widdecombe: The most recent available information relates to a sample of sentenced prisoners discharged from prison in 1992. The percentage who were convicted of a further offence during the two-year period following release was 51 per cent. There is no information centrally available on how many of those offences were committed during this period.

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what have been the reconviction rates for *(a)* two years and *(b)* five years after release for (i) adults, (ii) 14 to 16-year-olds, (iii) 15 to 17-year-olds, (iv) 16 to 18-year-olds and (v) 18 to 21-year-olds in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [28236]

Miss Widdecombe: The information requested is available only for all the age bands requested for those released between 1987 and 1992. Reconviction rates within five years of release from prison are currently available only for those released during 1987.

The available information is as follows:

Two year reconviction rates[1] for sentenced prisoners discharged from Prison Service establishments between 1983 and 1992

England and Wales

Age at sentence	*1992*	*1991*	*1990*	*1989*	*1988*	*1987*	*[2]1986*	*[2]1985*	*[2]1984*	*[2]1983*
Adults	45	45	45	45	47	48	42	44	46	48
Aged 14–16	89	87	89	85	83	83	75	75	74	77
Aged 15–17	81	81	83	81	80	79	—	—	—	—
Aged 16–18	75	76	77	75	74	75	—	—	—	—
Aged 18–20[3]	68	69	68	66	65	67	—	—	—	—
Aged 18–21	65	67	65	64	63	66	—	—	—	—
All young offenders	71	72	72	71	70	71	62	64	65	67
Total	51	53	52	53	55	57	50	52	54	56

[1] Relates to convictions for "standard list" offences only. These offences include all indictable offences and some of the more serious summary offences. Rates are based on samples of prisoners.

[2] Reconviction rates for those discharged prior to 1987 are not directly comparable with those for earlier years due to a change in methodology. Prior to 1987 the overall rates will be lower by around 5 to 6 percentage points due to this change; further details are given on page 6 of the Home Office publication 'Prison statistics, England and Wales, 1994' (Cm. 3087). Information is not available for some of the age groups requested and the figure for 14 to 16-year-olds relates to male prisoners only.

[3] Figures are supplied for those aged 18 to 20 in addition to those aged 18 to 21 as prisoners aged 21 at sentence are included among adults.

Five year reconviction rates[1] for sentenced prisoners discharged from Prison Service establishments during 1987

England and Wales Age at sentence	*Percentage*
Adults	62
Aged 14–16	91
Aged 15–17	89
Aged 16–18	86
Aged 18–20[3]	81
Aged 18–21	77
All young offenders	83
Total	70

[1] Relates to convictions for "standard list" offences only. These offences include all indictable offences and some of the more serious summary offences. Rates are based on samples of prisoners.

[2] Reconviction rates for those discharged prior to 1987 are not directly comparable with those for earlier years due to a change in methodology. Prior to 1987 the overall rates will be lower by around 5 to 6 percentage points due to this change; further details are given on page 6 of the Home Office publication 'Prison statistics, England and Wales, 1994' (Cm. 3087). Information is not available for some of the age groups requested and the figure for 14 to 16 year olds relates to male prisoners only.

[3] Figures are supplied for those aged 18 to 20 in addition to those aged 18 to 21 as prisoners aged 21 at sentence are included among adults.

Probation Service

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the probation service's record against its key performance indicators. [28227]

Mr. Sackville: The latest available information is contained in annexe I to the three-year plan for the probation service, published by the Home Office on 30 January, a copy of which is in the Library.

Mr. Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much money has been allocated to the probation service in each of the last six years; and if he will make a statement. [28231]

Mr. Sackville: This information is given in the Home Office annual report for 1996[1], page 65, table 8.i, a copy of which was placed in the Library.

[1]Cm 3208, published March 1996.

Prisons (Drugs)

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what procedures and actions are taken against prisoners found positive through mandatory drug testing for, or found in possession of, each type of mainstream illegal drug; and if he will make a statement. [28240]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Butler to Mr. Alex Carlile, dated 8 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question about the procedures and actions taken against prisoners found positive through mandatory drug testing or found in possession of drugs.

Offences relating to drugs within prison are pursued either through internal disciplinary and administrative procedures or by referral to the police for consideration for prosecution. It is for the prison governor to decide, in the light of the seriousness of an alleged offence of possession or supply, whether it should be referred to the police or dealt with through internal disciplinary procedures.

The full range of disciplinary sanctions is available to governors in dealing with drug offences. The most common disciplinary response when a prisoner is found guilty at adjudication of drug misuse, possession or supply is the addition of up to 42 days to the sentence. Cautions and suspended punishments are also available where there are mitigating circumstances.

When found guilty of drug misuse, the prisoner may also be required to undergo a repeat test or a programme of frequent tests. Other responses to drug offences may include their consideration as a factor when re-categorisation is considered; in the restriction of release on temporary licence and other privileges; and the imposition of closed visits.

Prison Population

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what were the numbers for the *(a)* male, *(b)* female and *(c)* total prison population in England and Wales for the last day in each of the past 24 months; and if he will make a statement. [28241]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Butler to Mr. Alex Carlile, dated 8 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question asking, what were the numbers for the *(a)* male, *(b)* female and *(c)* total prison population in England and Wales for the last day in each of the past 24 months; and if he will make a statement.

The requested information is given in the attached table.

Prison population[1] in England and Wales, by sex, on the last day of the month, May 1994 to April 1996

Date[2]	*Males*	*Females*	*Total*
1994			
May	46,887	1,788	48,675
June	47,125	1,804	48,929
July	47,310	1,859	49,169
August	47,494	1,898	49,392
September	47,863	1,949	49,812
October	47,946	1,905	49,851
November	48,657	1,908	50,565
December	45,839	1,772	47,611
1995			
January	47,675	1,867	49,542
February	48,641	1,930	50,571
March	49,585	2,009	51,594
April	48,809	1,978	50,787
May	48,661	1,982	50,643
June	49,086	1,998	51,084
July	49,335	1,944	51,279
August	49,296	1,969	51,265
September	49,277	2,009	51,286
October	50,009	2,018	52,027
November	50,430	2,110	52,540
December	48,019	1,930	49,949
1996			
January	49,922	2,025	51,947
February	51,101	2,077	53,178

Prison population[1] in England and Wales, by sex, on the last day of the month, May 1994 to April 1996

Date	Males	Females	Total
March	51,617	2,123	53,740
April[2]	52,028	2,183	54,211

[1] Includes those held in police cells.
[2] Provisional figures

John Blair

Mr. Madden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) when John Blair, detained in Her Majesty's prison Wakefield, applied to be repatriated to the Republic of Ireland; [28447]

(2) on what date John Blair, detained in Her Majesty's prison Wakefield, applied to be transferred to another prison; and when a decision is to be taken on his application. [28448]

Miss Widdecombe *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* Mr. Blair, who is at present serving a prison sentence in Wakefield prison, registered an interest in repatriation to the Republic of Ireland in November of last year, when detained at Whitemoor prison. His case is at present under consideration.

Mr. Blair has not applied formally to transfer to another prison in England or Wales, so this information cannot be provided. Mr. Blair requested a transfer verbally and his request will be considered as soon as a vacancy arises.

Gang Violence

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what role has been played to date by MI6 in respect of gang violence; [28461]

(2) if he will commission an inquiry into the desirability of establishing a special national unit to tackle violent crime with particular reference to gang activity; [28463]

(3) what steps are being taken to investigate whether there is a link between organised crime, protection rackets and companies which supply bouncers and doormen to nightclubs and public houses; [28455]

(4) what steps are being taken to address the incidence of violence linked with gang activity; [28460]

(5) what percentage of violent crime can be attributed to organised gangs. [28466]

Mr. Maclean *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* I will write to the hon. Member.

Patrick Kelly

Mr. Madden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) when Patrick Kelly applied to be repatriated to prison in the Irish Republic; in which prison he was detained when his application for repatriation was accepted; and if he will make a statement; [28439]

(2) if he will list the names of those individuals and organisations who have submitted representations urging him to authorise the transfer to the Irish Republic of Patrick Kelly. [28440]

Miss Widdecombe *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* Mr. Kelly first requested to be repatriated to the Republic of Ireland on 27 January 1994 at Parkhurst prison. Consideration could not be given to this request until the Republic of Ireland ratified the Council of Europe convention on the transfer of sentenced persons. The convention came into force for the Republic of Ireland on 1 November 1995.

Thirty-one representations have been received from members of the clergy, Members of Parliament, Members of the Irish Parliament, prisoner support groups and members of the public.

Scotland *v.* England Football Match

Mr. McAllion: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he has taken to ensure the safety of Scottish supporters at the Scotland *v.* England match at Wembley on 15 June, with particular reference to the segregation of rival supporters; and if he will make a statement. [28263]

Mr. Maclean *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* The overall policing strategy for Euro 96 is aimed at ensuring the safety and well being of all genuine and law-abiding football supporters who will be coming to England to enjoy Euro 96. The hon. Member can be assured that adequate security arrangements will be in place for the England *v.* Scotland match on 15 June both inside and outside Wembley stadium.

The football authorities have taken account of the importance of segregating rival fans in their plans for allocating seats.

Anyone intending to disrupt Euro 96 matches, and so spoil the enjoyment of others, can expect to be swiftly dealt with by the police, prosecuting authorities and the courts.

Boot Camps

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department by what means he will evaluate the effectiveness of the boot camp experiment; and if he will make a statement. [27923]

Miss Widdecombe *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Butler to Mr. Alex Carlile, dated 8 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question about the means used to evaluate the effectiveness of the boot camp experiment.

We will assess changes in the attitudes and behaviour of the young offenders sent to Colchester young offender institution and the high intensity training centre at Thorn Cross young offender institution. We will also monitor re-convictions after release. The results will be compared with those from a control group of similar young offenders who will experience conventional young offender institution regimes.

Mr. Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what research is available within the Prison Service on the probable reconviction rates from the high impact or boot camp regimes; and if he will make a statement. [27926]

Miss Widdecombe *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Butler to Mr. Alex Carlile, dated 8 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question about research available within the Prison Service on the probable reconviction rates from the high impact or boot camp regimes.

The two initiatives which we have announced, namely High Intensity Training and Colchester young offender institution, are both pilots. They themselves will be providing evidence of the effectiveness of the new approaches adopted, and there are no directly parallel initiatives to provide evidence at present on likely reconviction rates.

There is limited relevance in research on other schemes. Copies of readily available published research into American boot camps were placed in the Library of the House last year.

I must stress however that our two regimes are not copies of American boot camps.

Forensic Science Service

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many laboratories will close and how many jobs will be lost as a result of the merger of the Forensic Science Service with the Metropolitan police forensic science laboratory and if he will make a statement. [27925]

Mr. Maclean *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* Restructuring proposals within the Forensic Science Service will result in the closure of one laboratory at Aldermaston, at the end of 1996. Possible closure of a further two laboratories is subject to further consultation. The merger with the Metropolitan police forensic science laboratory has allowed the restructuring to be planned on a national basis throughout England and Wales, but the need for major restructuring to streamline the service had been identified prior to the decision for the two organisations to be merged. All present scientific caseworking staff will be offered jobs in the FSS, but there will be some reduction in support staff.

Mr. Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when plans to merge the Forensic Science Service with the Metropolitan police forensic science laboratory will become operable; what safeguards will be put in place to ensure the impartiality of the new service; and if he will make a statement. [27927]

Mr. Maclean *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* The Metropolitan police forensic science laboratory merged with the Forensic Science Service on 1 April 1996 to make the new FSS a national service throughout England and Wales. It remains a Home Office executive agency and the chief executive continues to have delegated authority for its operation under the terms of its framework agreement and within the policies determined by the Secretary of State. These include maintenance of the required impartiality and quality of its work, including its science. The FSS leads the way for forensic science organisations in external accreditation of its procedures to NAMAS M10 and ISO 9000 standards.

Police Information Technology Organisation

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the police information technology organisation will become operable; what plans he has to contract it out; and if he will make a statement. [27928]

Mr. Maclean *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Lady Olga Maitland) on 1 April at column *60*. There are no plans to contract out the police information technology organisation, although many of the information technology services it provides will continue to be delivered under contract by private sector suppliers.

Recidivision

Mr. Michael: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what percentage of offenders are *(a)* convicted of further offences during the two-year period following the completion of a probation order and *(b)* convicted of further offences which were committed during the two-year period following the completion of a probation order; [27573]

(2) what percentage of offenders are *(a)* convicted of further offences during the two-year period following the completion of a community service order and *(b)* convicted of further offences which were committed during the two-year period following the completion of a community service order. [27608]

Mr. Maclean *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* The most recent available information relates to samples of offenders who commenced orders in 1987. The percentage of offenders who were convicted of a further offence during the two-year period following the completion of a probation order was 44 per cent. and the corresponding percentage for community service was 47 per cent. These figures were first published in table 4.3 of the Home Office publication "Probation Statistics, England and Wales, 1994".

Completion of an order does not necessarily imply completion without reoffending and a proportion of those completing orders will be reconvicted on the date of termination. If the termination date is included in the two-year follow-up period, the reconviction rates for probation and community service are then 49 and 52 per cent. respectively.

Reconviction rates that are usually quoted relate to reconviction during the two-year period following commencement of orders. The most recent information relates to samples of offenders commencing orders in 1992. The percentage of offenders reconvicted within two years of commencement of a probation order was 58 per cent. and the corresponding percentage for community service was 55 per cent.

There is no information available centrally on the percentages convicted of further offences which were committed during the two-year period following the completion of orders.

Ministry of Defence Police Officers

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the Home Office constabularies

in England and Wales whose control rooms can broadcast to and receive calls from the personal radios of Ministry of Defence police officers. [27807]

Mr. Maclean *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* Where necessary, local arrangements exist to enable Ministry of Defence police officers to be in two-way radio contact with Home Office constabularies. I am aware that the following forces in England and Wales have entered into such local arrangements:

Avon and Somerset
Cheshire
Devon and Cornwall
Dorset
Essex
Gloucestershire
Gwent
Hampshire
Kent
Lancashire
Merseyside
Metropolitan
North Wales
North Yorkshire
South Wales
Staffordshire
Suffolk
Surrey
Sussex
Thames Valley
Wiltshire

Kashmir

Mr. Madden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans Her Majesty's Government have to encourage the Government of India to enter into negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations, to secure a settlement of the Kashmir dispute based on self-determination for the people of Kashmir. [28450]

Mr. Hanley: I have been asked to reply.

We continue to believe that the best way forward on Kashmir should involve simultaneous progress on dialogue between India and Pakistan, as provided for under the 1972 Simla agreement; improvement in human rights in Kashmir and a genuine political process there; and a clear cessation of external support for violence in Kashmir.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Historic Buildings (Disrepair)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage, pursuant to her answer of 29 April, *Official Report*, column *371*, if she will list *(a)* the 31 historic buildings known to be in disrepair and at risk and *(b)* the 17 for which Departments have disposal proposals, indicating for each the Department involved. [27874]

Mr. Sproat: Details of the historic buildings on the Government estate which are known to be in disrepair and at risk are given in annexe 3 to the conservation unit's annual conservation report on the Government's historic estate 1994–95, published in March; copies are available in the Library. Some entries on this list cover more than one building.

Most of these buildings at risk are the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence, who has informed my Department's conservation unit of disposal plans for at least 17 of them. Information about these and other historic buildings on the defence estate proposed for disposal are contained in the Defence Estate Organisation's annual report for 1994–95, "Defending our Heritage", copies of which are available in the Library.

National Lottery Funding

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage how much national lottery funding has been allocated to the South Bank Centre and its environs by each of the funds. [27427]

Mr. Sproat: There have been three awards, to date, allocated to the South Bank and its environs. The information is as follows:

Body	*Announced*	*Recipient*	*Amount* £
Arts	30 March 1995	South Bank Centre	980,000
Arts	21 September 1995	British Film Institute	250,000
Arts	16 April 1996	Royal National Theatre	31,590,000
Total			32,820,000

Broadcasting Complaints Commission

Mr. Harry Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans she has to amend the Broadcasting Act 1990 to set a time limit within which the Broadcasting Complaints Commission is required to answer complaints; and if she will make a statement. [27937]

Mr. Sproat: The Government have no plans to amend the Broadcasting Act in this way. Although the commission strives to process complaints speedily, some cases, whether they concern allegations of unfairness or infringement of privacy or both, may deal with particularly complex issues and involve delays beyond the commission's control, and it is right that the commission should consider carefully all elements of such cases before making its adjudication.

Museums and Galleries (Attendances)

Mr. Faulds: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if she will publish the attendance figures for the financial year ended 31 March reported by the national museums and galleries for which she is responsible, broken down into the individual institutions, but including their outstations, with figures in each case of the percentage increase or decrease on the attendance figures for the preceding year. [25517]

Mr. Sproat *[holding answer 22 April 1996]:* The British Museum, national gallery, national portrait gallery, Wallace collection, Tate gallery, though it charges for admission to St. Ives, national museums, and Galleries on

Merseyside, though it charges for admission to two of its seven sites, and Victoria and Albert Museum do not charge for admissions, and therefore the number of visits is only an estimate, or counted by other means.

	Number of visits in 1994–95 (million)	*Forecast number of visits in 1995–96 (million)*	*Provisional percentage increase/decrease over the previous year*
British Museum	6.24	6.14	–1.6
Imperial War Museum	1.27	1.31	+3.1
National Gallery	4.36	4.46	+2.3
National Maritime Museum	0.62	0.58	–6.5
National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside	1.34	1.23	–8.2
National Portrait Gallery	0.93	0.82	–11.8
Natural History Museum	1.64	1.46	–11.0
National Museum of Science and Industry	2.51	2.70	+7.6
Tate Gallery	2.75	2.86	+4.0
Victoria and Albert Museum	1.57	1.49	–5.1
Wallace Collection	0.15	0.16	+6.7
Total	23.38	23.21	–0.73

It is not possible to identify separately the number of visits to the royal armouries in the Tower of London. However, a new royal armouries artillery museum opened in 1995—from April to October only—at Fort Nelson near Portsmouth, to which there were an estimated 23,000 visits. Additionally, a new royal armouries museum was opened in Leeds on 30 March 1996 and data on the number of visits to this site will be available next year.

Business Subsidies

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if she will list the grants and loans provided by her Department to businesses, together with the criteria they have to meet in order to obtain the subsidy. [28191]

Mr. Sproat *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* My Department has not provided any businesses with grants or loans.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Child Support Agency

Sir David Steel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what provision there is to prevent absentee fathers from changing their circumstances in order to inhibit the ability of the CSA to claim maintenance payments from them. [27642]

Mr. Andrew Mitchell: Maintenance assessments are intended to reflect the ability of parents to contribute to their children's support. Assessments may be revised following a change in the circumstances of either parent and will be effective only from the date the change was reported. The Child Support Agency will take action to collect any outstanding arrears as well as current maintenance. This may include the imposition of deduction from earnings orders and applications for liability orders.

Provisions already exist that enable a child support officer to include notional income as part of a parent's resources where he is satisfied that a parent has intentionally deprived himself or failed to secure income or capital with the intention of avoiding or reducing his child support liability.

In addition, the new departure system that is currently being piloted with a view to its introduction later this year will include further measures to prevent absent parents from manipulating the system to reduce their maintenance liability. Parents will be able to apply for a departure from the standard formula assessment where it is unrealistically low because an absent parent is diverting income to another person or for another purpose; has assets which are not producing or sufficient income; or otherwise has a life style which is inconsistent with the level of income on which the maintenance assessment is based.

Finally, there are sanctions in the benefit system against people who give up work voluntarily.

Reduced Earnings Allowance

Ms Lynne: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what advance warning was given to former claimants of reduced earnings allowance no longer entitled to benefit before the changes to the reduced earnings allowance which came into force from 24 March. [27977]

Mr. Roger Evans: In his statement of 29 November 1995, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security announced his intention to introduce measures to correct anomalies in reduced earnings allowance being paid past pensionable age to individuals who did not continue in regular employment. The individuals affected have been identified by the Benefits Agency and are being advised of the effect of the 1996 amendment regulations, following review of their awards of reduced earnings allowance and retirement allowance.

Ms Lynne: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the estimated number of people over pension age who will cease to receive reduced earnings allowance following the new rules for reduced earnings allowance which came into force on 24 March; and what is the average amount that was paid weekly to the disentitled claimants of the reduced earnings allowance. [27976]

Mr. Evans: The information is not available in the format requested.

However, on 2 April 1994 19,250 recipients of reduced earnings allowance were over pensionable age and not being paid at a protected rate following the introduction of retirement allowance in 1989. Their average weekly rate was £36.05. The estimated effect of the 1996 amendment regulations is to transfer the vast majority of pension age reduced earnings allowance recipients who are not in regular employment to retirement allowance.

Ms Lynne: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into the payment of the retirement allowance at 25 per cent. of the reduced earnings

allowance rate with particular reference to the reduced pension entitlement caused by lower earnings during the claimant's working life. [28132]

Mr. Evans: None. The introduction of retirement allowance was enacted by Parliament in the Social Security Act 1988.

Adjudication and Child Support Regulations

Mr. Tim Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will place in the Library a copy of the response made on 11 December 1995 by the president of the Independent Tribunal Service to the proposed Social Security (Adjudication) and Child Support Amendment Regulations 1996. [28689]

Mr. Roger Evans: A copy has been placed in the Library.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Office Space

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and food if he will list the square footage and cost of office space rented by his Department and its agencies and the number of his Department or agencies' buildings partly or fully unoccupied together with the space footage of that unoccupied office space and its estimated rental value where available in each of the past five financial years. [27732]

Mr. Boswell: The Ministry occupies both freehold and leasehold—rented—accommodation. On 1 April 1996, the Ministry rented some 580,000 sq ft. of office accommodation for its own use at a rental cost of approximately £8 million per annum.

Of this area, some 33,700 sq ft. of accommodation with a rental cost of £334,000 was vacant pending disposal.

Owing to changes in responsibility for management of the Crown estate which came into effect on 1 April 1996 and changes in the way that Departments have been charged for leasehold accommodation, comparable details for previous years could be made available only at disproportionate cost.

Beef Exports

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish a breakdown of British beef exports by *(a)* weight, *(b)* value and *(c)* destination for the year ended 31 December 1995. [28077]

Mr. Boswell: Exports of beef from the UK for 1995 as recorded in the overseas trade statistics are as follows:

	000's tonnes	*£ million*
France	106.2	239.4
Italy	30.7	93.3
Irish Republic	29.3	57.2
South Africa	27.1	23.8
Netherlands	23.9	68.0
Denmark	7.1	17.5
Spain	7.0	18.5
Belgium-Luxembourg	4.1	16.2
Portugal	3.3	8.5
Germany	2.8	8.9
Mauritius	2.5	3.8
Ghana	2.4	2.5
Angola	1.8	1.5
Malta	1.7	2.2
Saudia Arabia	1.7	1.7
Hungary	1.6	1.8
Philippines	1.6	1.5
Gabon	1.6	1.7
Hong Kong	1.3	1.8
Greece	1.2	2.6
Other Countries	13.7	21.8
Total	594.1	271.8

All figures are provisional.

Commercial Whaling

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is Her Majesty's Government policy on the resumption of commercial whaling. [28843]

Mr. Baldry: The United Kingdom has strongly supported the International Whaling Commission's moratorium on commercial whaling since it came into force in 1986. Commercial whaling meets no pressing nutritional, economic or social needs and, as the growing global demand to watch whales in the wild demonstrates, it is possible for local communities to derive substantial benefits from whales without the need to kill them. Commercial whaling is opposed by the vast majority of our citizens and by Parliament, as well as by many of the countries concerned with the conservation and management of whales through the International Whaling Commission. Accordingly, the UK will oppose any move to end the current moratorium on commercial whaling.

Cattle Slaughter

Dr. Strang: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many days per week he estimates will be devoted by each slaughterhouse to the slaughter of cattle over the age of 30 months. [28324]

Mr. Baldry *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* This will vary from slaughterhouse to slaughterhouse. Some will devote their full capacity to the slaughter of these cattle while others will slaughter them on different numbers of full days each week.

Dr. Strang: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many slaughterhouses he estimates will be involved in the slaughter of cattle over the age of 30 months. [28322]

Mr. Baldry *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* We expect 40 to 50 slaughterhouses to be involved initially. If necessary, this number will be increased in the light of experience.

Dr. Strang: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which officials will be responsible for supervising the slaughter of cattle over the age of 30 months. [28323]

Mr. Baldry *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* Officials of the Meat Hygiene Service will supervise the slaughter of these animals.

SCOTLAND

Enterprise Companies

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he has completed his review of the performance of Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise; and if he will make a statement. [28168]

Mr. Kynoch: No. My right hon. Friend announced the review on 7 February. Comments were invited by 31 March, but a number of organisations asked for and were given an extension of the deadline to end April. The responses are being analysed and the first stage of the review, which is proceeding to schedule, should be completed this summer.

Deaf-blind People

Mr. Alfred Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many deaf-blind people were resident in the area of each local authority at the latest date for which figures are available; how many local authorities do not currently offer basic rehabilitation and social work support services for deaf-blind people; what action he is taking to improve local provision for them; and if he will make a statement. [27142]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The table shows the number of blind and partially sighted people with deafness as an additional disability, resident in each local authority region as at 31 March 1995.

Persons registered blind who are also deaf: 31 March 1995

Region	*Registered blind with deafness as an additional disability*	*Registered partially sighted with deafness as an additional disability*
Borders	22	9
Central	100	27
Dumfries and Galloway	31	21
Fife	27	26
Grampian	257	142
Highland	129	45
Lothian	114	71
Strathclyde	720	204
Tayside	43	25
Orkney	13	7
Shetland	0	0
Western Isles	4	1
Scotland	1,460	578

Information about the number of local authorities that do not currently offer basic rehabilitation and social work support services for deaf-blind people is not held centrally.

Under our community care arrangements, local authorities are required to tailor services to individual needs through comprehensive multi-disciplinary assessments, including the appointment of a care manager. This results in significant scope for local authorities to provide rehabilitation and social work support services themselves or, where this is not possible, to purchase these from the independent sector, particularly voluntary organisations.

The Government have identified people with sensory impairments as a priority for grant funding. Grants have been awarded to voluntary organisations including Sense and the National Deaf-Blind and Rubella Association and the National Deaf-Blind League to provide assistance with awareness training for staff working with deaf-blind adults and children and to improve the provision of rehabilitation, information, support and communication systems.

Local authorities are required to develop joint plans for the provision of services to disabled people, including those with a sensory impairment, and in doing so to consult them, their carers and those voluntary agencies which represent their interests. We are closely monitoring these plans to ensure that adequate progress is being made in developing services for deaf-blind people.

Forest Enterprise Agency

Mr. Tipping: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what are the mechanisms for accountability and responsibility of the chief executive of the Forest Enterprise Agency in relation to *(a)* Forestry Commission and *(b)* Ministers. [28409]

Mr. Kynoch: These are set out in the agency's framework document, copies of which are in the Library.

Scottish Grand Committee

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many meetings of the Scottish Grand Committee he plans to hold up to April 1997; and how many times *(a)* the Prime Minister and *(b)* other Cabinet Ministers will attend. [25491]

Mr. Michael Forsyth *[holding answer 16 April 1996]:* Last Session, there were four meetings of the Grand Committee in Scotland. So far this Session there have been eight meetings of the Grand Committee in Scotland and I hope that there will be a further four or five before the summer recess. As for next Session, I hope that up to eight meetings will take place in Scotland before April 1997. I acknowledge that the hon. Lady and her party have an excellent record of attendance at meetings of the Grand Committee and I would be happy to discuss with her any suggestions she has for venues and subjects to debate.

Following the Chancellor of the Exchequer's successful visit to Aberdeen in February, I expect that other members of the Government will participate as appropriate.

Marine Laboratory, Aberdeen

Mr. Foulkes: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what issues of public policy are the responsibility of the Scottish Office Agriculture, Environment and Fisheries Department marine laboratory in Aberdeen. [25769]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson *[holding answer 24 April 1996]:* The marine laboratory in Aberdeen is part of the Scottish Office, and contributes to the advice to Ministers on a range of issues affecting fisheries and the marine environment.

Crofting

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what measures he is taking to support crofters *(a)* in respect of (i) arterial drainage and (ii) hill drainage projects, *(b)* to provide stock grids, *(c)* in respect of the planting of shelter belts, *(d)* to provide or improve their mains electricity, gas connection and electrical equipment and *(e)* in respect of projects to improve roads, bridges, culverts or boat slips. [28199]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* The crofting counties agricultural grants scheme currently provides grants to crofters towards the costs of all these measures. The agricultural business improvement scheme currently offers grants in respect of the planting of shelter belts; provision, replacement or improvement of electricity supplies; and the provision of stock grids on croft roads. The farm woodland premium scheme and the Forestry Commission's woodland grant scheme currently provide support in respect of the planting of shelter belts.

WALES

Consultants

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many consultants there were in *(a)* urology, *(b)* ear, nose and throat, *(c)* paediatrics, *(d)* ophthalmology and *(e)* anaesthetics for the years (i) 1990, (ii) 1992 and (iii) 1995; and if he will make a statement. [27891]

Mr. Richards: The information is given in the table:

Consultants in post at 30 September (excluding locums)

	1990		*1992*		*1995*	
	Number	*'Wte*	*Number*	*'Wte*	*Number*	*'Wte*
Urology	10	10.0	11	11.0	15	13.7
Ear, Nose andthroat	25	22.4	27	25.3	27	26.0
Paediatrics	41	38.2	47	43.8	65	60.8
Ophthalmology	28	25.7	29	27.0	35	28.5
Anaesthetics	125	121.6	134	131.0	144	139.8

[1] Whole-time equivalent.

Salaries

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what was the *(a)* lowest and *(b)* highest full-time salary paid to an employee in his (i) Department, (ii) agencies and (iii) non-departmental public bodies in (1) 1994–95 and (2) 1995–96; and if he will make a statement. [27892]

Mr. Hague: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) on 1 November 1995 at column *301*.

School Transport

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is the latest estimate of the costs of school transport in each of the former counties of Wales. [28068]

Mr. Richards: The costs of the home-to-school transport, net of parental contributions, in each of the former counties in Wales for 1994–95 is given in the table.

	000's
Clwyd	5,182
Dyfed	6,707
Gwent	4,484
Gwynedd	3,283
Mid Glamorgan	7,112
Powys	3,304
South Glamorgan	2,392
West Glamorgan	3,906

Uniform Business Rates

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will publish the figures arising from research undertaken by his Department indicating the proportion of turnover represented by uniform business rates, analysed by size of enterprise. [27950]

Mr. Hague: The figures were published in 1995 in the Department of the Environment document, "The Impact of Rates on Businesses", covering both England and Wales. A copy is in the Library of the House.

Small Businesses

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what measures he proposes to increase the competitiveness of small businesses in Wales. [28072]

Mr. Richards: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 2 May 1996 at column *624*. The Government will outline their latest policies for the support of small firms in this year's White Paper on competitiveness, to be published this summer.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many staff are currently employed at the Welsh Office; and what the level is expected to be by April 1997. [27901]

Mr. Hague: The number of full-time equivalent staff employed in my Department at 1 April 1996 was 2,295. Staff levels are expected to fall to some 2,100 in the year beginning April 1997.

Play Schemes

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the factors which led him to conclude that Play Wales would be a more effective organisation when funded by local authorities as proposed in his consultation paper, "The Welsh Office and Local Government—Redefining the Relationship". [27393]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: My right hon. Friend and I have yet to reach any conclusions about future funding arrangements for Play Wales. Devolving responsibilities for funding Play Wales to local government is one of the options we will be considering.

Mr. Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales for how long, on what basis and for what purpose the Welsh Office provided funding for Play Wales; and what plans he has to ensure that local authorities will maintain this provision. [27394]

Mr. Jones: Direct government financial support for Play Wales has been provided by the Welsh Office since 1988. The grant, which is provided under the appropriation legislation, supports the development of children's play by funding the staffing and administration of Play Wales. If it is decided that this funding should be devolved to local government it will be for councils to decide on levels of provision in the light of their priorities.

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to introduce legislation to remove the registration and inspection requirements for the provision of supervised activities used by children under the age of eight years and to relax the registration requirements for holiday play schemes in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [28235]

Mr. Hague: I refer the hon. Member to the reply that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Health gave to the hon. Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn) on 18 March 1996 at column *82*.

Mr. Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the reviews carried out in respect of Play Wales in 1993 and 1995; and which conclusions from these reviews led to his present proposal to carry out a further review of Play Wales. [27396]

Mr. Jones: Following the reviews carried out in 1993 and 1995, the then Secretaries of State and I concluded that the best way forward would be the continuation of the existing funding arrangements for Play Wales. In doing so, however, we made clear our intention to look again, after local government reorganisation, at whether the Welsh Office should continue to be responsible for direct funding of Play Wales.

Public Funding

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the voluntary organisations and non-departmental public bodies that have received funding from the Welsh Office in the last five years, indicating how often each has been subject to specific reviews by the Welsh Office, including those for which reviews are currently being proposed. [27395]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: All executive public bodies that have received Welsh Office funding in the last five years are listed in "Public Bodies 1995", a copy of which is available in the Library of the House.

The Welsh Office carries out a financial management and policy review of each executive public body at least every five years.

Reviews are currently proposed of the Welsh Development Agency, the Development Board for Rural Wales and the Land Authority for Wales.

I have arranged for lists of the voluntary organisations that have directly received funding from the Welsh Office for each of the years 1990–91 to 1994–95 to be placed in the Library of the House. An exercise to collate a comprehensive list of all voluntary organisations that have received funding in 1995–96 is currently being undertaken.

The Welsh Office has carried out reviews of the following grant schemes under which voluntary organisations have received funding during the last five years:

Scheme	*Year*
Care and Repair grants	1993–94
Child and Family Service	1995–96
Environment Wales	1995–96
Section 73 Homelessness grants	1990–91
Special Grants Environmental Programme	1990–91
Support for Voluntary Intermediary Services	1995–96
Groundwork Trusts	1995–96
UK2000	1990–91
Voluntary Youth Services, Village Halls and Community Centres Programme	1994–95
Welsh Archaeological Trusts	1995–96

In addition, the following individual organisations have been reviewed by the Welsh Office:

Organisation	*Year*
Standing Council of Voluntary Organisations	1991–92
South Wales Association for the Prevention of Addiction	1991–92
Swansea Drugs Project	1990–91
Youthlink	1993–94

School Admissions

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to his answers of 16 April, *Official Report*, column *426*, and 24 April, *Official Report*, column *179*, in respect of which schools he has received information on variations between their approved admissions number and their proposed admissions for September 1996. [27740]

Mr. Richards: Grant-maintained schools must set as their planned admissions limit a number no smaller than the current approved admission number. They are not, however, required to inform the Welsh Office when the proposed admissions in any school year exceeds the approved admission number. I am, however, aware that Stanwell school in Penarth has set an admissions figure for September 1996 of 264, which exceeds its AAN of 182. This was not made clear in my reply of 16 April.

Cadw

Mr. Sweeney: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what targets he has set for Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments Agency. [28685]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: Cadw has been set the following key targets for 1996–97:

1. To complete 90 per cent. of the approved conservation maintenance programme.
2. To complete 60 resurvey lists.
3. To resolve 75 per cent. of ad hoc listing cases within 17 weeks.
4. To complete 100 scheduling actions, of which at least 70 per cent. involve additional protection.
5. To resolve 75 per cent. of listed building consent cases within 4 weeks and 90 per cent. of cases in 6 weeks.
6. To resolve 75 per cent. of scheduled monument consent cases within 13 weeks and 90 per cent. of cases within 17 weeks.

7. To resolve 80 per cent. of Historic Buildings grant applications in 18 weeks.

8. To resolve 80 per cent. of Ancient Monument grant applications within 6 weeks.

9. To pay 90 per cent. of properly presented claims for Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments grants within 5 weeks of receipt.

10. To achieve a market share of 63 per cent. of the number of visitors to the top twenty heritage sites in Wales.

11. To reduce direct net cost per visitor at Cadw's sites to an average of 40p.

12. To operate within allocated programme and running cost budgets.

13. To achieve efficiency gains of at least 3 per cent.

Full details of Cadw's performance against its targets for 1996–97 will be published in the agency's annual report.

NORTHERN IRELAND

YG-I Tool Company

Mrs. Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what estimate he has made of the impact on job prospects in the engineers' cutting tool sector of the establishment of a new facility in Belfast by YG-I Tool Company of Korea. [27097]

Mr. Ancram: The establishment of this facility is unlikely to impact on job prospects in the engineer's cutting tool sector. In all cases where Government assistance is given to inward investors, an assessment is made of the risk of job displacement. This was done in the case of the European Tool company, the Northern Ireland subsidiary of YG-I Tool Company of Korea.

Mrs. Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what consultation he had with the Federation of British Engineers' Tool Manufacturers prior to approving a grant to the Korean company YG-I Tool Co. of Korea to set up a manufacturing base in Belfast.

Mr. Ancram: No direct consultation was sought with the Federation of British Engineers' Tool Manufacturers, though information published by the federation was used during the course of the appraisal.

Multiple Births

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many sets of *(a)* twins, *(b)* triplets, *(c)* quadruplets, *(d)* quintuplets and *(e)* sextuplets were born in Northern Ireland in each year from 1990 to 1995; and if he will make a statement. [27436]

Mr. Moss: The information requested is set out in the table:

Sets of	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*[1]1995*
Twins	267	315	258	280	289	327
Triplets	5	6	8	9	6	7
Quadruplets	—	—	—	—	—	2
Quintuplets	—	1	—	—	—	—
Sextuplets	—	—	—	—	—	—

[1] Provisional.

Office Space

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the square footage and cost of office space rented by his Department and its agencies and the number of his Department or agencies' buildings partly or fully unoccupied together with the square footage of that unoccupied office space and its estimated rental value where available in each of the past five financial years. [27724]

Sir John Wheeler: The information is not readily available in the format requested and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Irish Republic (Constitution)

Mr. Gallie: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he will next meet the Foreign Secretary of Eire to discuss constitutional matters in Eire; and if he will make a statement. [27223]

Sir Patrick Mayhew: I have no specific plans to meet the Irish Foreign Minister to discuss constitutional matters in the Republic of Ireland. Constitutional matters relating to Northern Ireland may be part of the negotiations starting on 10 June.

School Transport

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what percentage of the children of the United Kingdom go to school in Northern Ireland; what percentage of the expenditure on school transport in the United Kingdom is spent in Northern Ireland; and what factors underlie the level of expenditure. [27741]

Mr. Ancram: In 1993–94, the last year for which comparative figures are available, 4 per cent. of school children in the United Kingdom attended school in Northern Ireland. School transport expenditure in Northern Ireland was 7.9 per cent. of the school transport bill for the United Kingdom. In Northern Ireland school transport is currently provided where a pupil gains admission to a school outside statutory walking distance from home—defined as two miles for pupils under 11 and three miles for other pupils—and provided that a public or board transport service to or in the vicinity of the school is already available. Transport arrangements in other areas of the United Kingdom are the responsibility of the relevant Secretaries of State.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the current expenditure on school transport in Northern Ireland; and what is the projected expenditure over the next five years. [27742]

Mr. Ancram: Recurrent expenditure on home-to-school transport in Northern Ireland in 1994–95, the latest year for which actual expenditure is available, was £34.7 million. If present transport arrangements were to continue, it is estimated that annual expenditure would rise to more than £41 million by 1998–99. Projections of expenditure beyond 1998–99 are not yet available.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on his proposals for school transport and the administrative and legislative mechanisms that will be used to implement them. [27743]

Mr. Ancram: A consultation paper outlining a number of options for reducing the escalating costs of transport was issued in December 1995. As a result of the views expressed, I have asked education and library boards to take forward further detailed consideration of the options, including consultation with schools and other interests. That process is still on-going and in the interim the existing arrangements remain unchanged.

Class Sizes

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many classes for the first three years of primary school in Northern Ireland have more than 30 children; how many children are involved; and what would be the cost in teachers' salaries to ensure that the maximum class size for the first three years of school is 30. [27745]

Mr. Ancram: Information is not available in the form requested.

Schools and Colleges (Expenditure)

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, pursuant to his answer of 12 March, *Official Report*, column *543–44*, if he will list the applications that he received for capital projects in the last financial year and the priority ratings he assigned to them. [27746]

Mr. Ancram: The planning of major building schemes for schools and colleges in Northern Ireland is an on-going process. The selection of schemes for inclusion in the Department's capital building programme takes account of the priority rating of individual schemes, their state of planning readiness and the availability of resources in any year.

At present there are 121 major schemes in the top three priority categories in the schools planning list. These are at various stages of planning. Twelve high priority building schemes for further education colleges are also in planning.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what information he collates relating to the percentage of budget increase passed on to schools in each of the education and library board areas; and if he will make a statement. [27750]

Mr. Ancram: My Department collates a range of financial information from boards on school funding and keeps a check on percentage increases in aggregated schools budgets each year.

Teachers

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many retirements there have been by teachers on the grounds of ill health in Northern Ireland in each of the past 10 years. [27747]

Mr. Ancram: I refer the hon. Member to the reply that I gave him on 28 March, *Official Report*, column *741*.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many redundancies of teachers are projected to occur in the current financial year in each of the five education and library boards in Northern Ireland. [27749]

Mr. Ancram: The information sought is not available. Under local management of schools, the number of teachers to be employed is a matter for school boards of governors.

Cross-community Contact Scheme

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, pursuant to his answer of 29 March, *Official Report*, column *755*, if he will make a statement on the reasons for a decrease in the number of secondary schools participating in the cross-community contact scheme. [27748]

Mr. Ancram: Participation in the cross-community contact scheme is entirely voluntary. It is therefore inappropriate to ask individual schools about their reasons for non-participation.

Health and Social Services Estates Agency

Mr. Nigel Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what performance targets have been set for the Northern Ireland Health and Social Services Estates Agency. [28687]

Mr. Moss: The following targets have been set for the Northern Ireland Health and Social Services Estates Agency for 1996–97. The targets are in line with the Government's policy of seeking to improve the service provided to clients in terms of both quality and value for money. I am satisfied that the targets present a demanding challenge for the agency.

Delivery of services

To ensure the specification as to quality and quantity of services defined in the Service Level Agreement with the Health and Social Services—Executive is fully met.

To set in place service-level agreements with the remainder of the client bodies for the provision of services.

To develop a customer charter in line with the ethos of the Northern Ireland citizens charter.

Efficiency of services

To carry out appropriate in-year efficiency reviews including the continuous market testing of design and consultancy functions to ensure that the most efficient and effective use is made of the agency's resources.

To carry out a review of the agency's senior management structure by 31 March 1997.

To ensure the achievement of an in-house 3 per cent. efficiency saving.

To develop a programme for the measurement and management of productive to non-productive staff time.

Financial management

To manage the agency's resources so as to deliver the business plan within a total budget of £4,004 million.

To implement the requirements of the health estates resources accounting systems by 31 March 1997.

A copy of the targets is being placed in the Library of the House.

Military Complaints Assessor

Mr. Nigel Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he intends to lay before Parliament Mr. David Hewitt's third annual report as independent assessor of military complaints procedure in Northern Ireland. [28688]

Sir Patrick Mayhew: Yesterday, I arranged for the third annual report of the independent assessor of military complaints procedures in Northern Ireland to be laid before each House of Parliament. I am grateful to the assessor for his report for 1995, a year in which the Army's role of providing support to the Royal Ulster Constabulary had been greatly reduced following the announcement by the paramilitary organisations of the cessations of military operations and which saw only 19 formal non-criminal complaints made against members of the armed forces.

The assessor notes that there is now a general acceptance that the Army's processing of complaints has been done reasonably well in difficult situations. I fully concur with this and I am pleased that the general officer commanding has been able to accept both of the assessor's recommendations.

The post of independent assessor remains important and will continue for as long as there is a need for the Army to patrol in support of the RUC in Northern Ireland.

Oral Contraceptives

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he was consulted in his capacity as a member of the Licensing Authority prior to the issuing of a letter dated 18 October 1995 relating to oral contraceptives containing desogestrel and gestodene. [26576]

Mr. Moss *[holding answer 25 April 1996]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Minister for Health on 25 April, *Official Report*, column *281*.

DEFENCE

Meterological Office

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what key performance targets have been set for the Meteorological Office for the financial year 1996–97. [28585]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The Meteorological Office has been set a range of quality, financial and efficiency targets to ensure that it delivers progressive improvements in the provision of weather-related services in 1996–97.

The key quality target set for the Meteorological Office during financial year 1996–97 is to achieve 80 per cent. of the designated business plan external targets for customer satisfaction, forecast accuracy and timeliness. Additionally, the agency is to devise a value for money index to measure the quality of its services. The accuracy of the agency's numerical weather prediction model is to be improved by at least 2 per cent. in 1996–97, as measured by an index of internationally exchanged model performance data.

The Meteorological Office was established as a trading fund on 1 April 1996 with a financial target to achieve an overall return on capital employed of at least 7 per cent. A target of £3.3 million has been set for the net contribution to the agency's core costs and central overheads from the provision of commercial services to the public, industry and commerce, excluding the Civil Aviation Authority and the Department of the Environment.

The 1996–97 efficiency target is to meet the key quality target within gross expenditure, before interest charges, of £140.3 million. For future efficiency targets the agency is to develop an auditable efficiency index.

Operation Purple Star

Mr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what contribution Britain has made to Operation Purple Star; what is the purpose of the exercise; and if he will make a statement. [28277]

Mr. Soames: Exercise Purple Star is the culmination of a four-year cycle of purple exercises. The UK is contributing some 12,000 forces to what is the largest combined UK-US deployment since the Gulf crisis in 1991.

The UK commitment includes a maritime task force of some 30 ships, led by HMS Illustrious and including an escort force of six destroyers-frigates and two nuclear-powered attack submarines. Sixty RAF aircraft are to take part, including a force of 20 Harrier and Tornado fast jets in the offensive air role and 18 troop-carrying helicopters. In addition, 3 Commando Brigade and 5 Airborne Brigade, key elements of the joint rapid deployment force, will also participate.

The purpose of the exercise is to give UK and US forces practice in operating together in a force of this size. The UK is also using the exercise to provide useful operational experience to the newly formed permanent joint headquarters, and to examine the strategic deployment, command, control and maintenance of JRDF elements.

Dr. Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how long it took HMS Fearless to travel from Britain to Operation Purple Star. [28279]

Mr. Soames: The journey took 10 days—from 16 to 26 April—as planned.

Dr. Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what problems were experienced in the sea journey of HMS Fearless to Operation Purple Star; and what assessment he has made of her performance. [28278]

Mr. Soames: No problems were experienced in the sea journey of HMS Fearless to Operation Purple Star. This mission was assessed as satisfactorily completed.

Porton Down Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 8 February, *Official Report*, columns *354–55*, for what reason the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment introduced formal written protocols in 1990; and in what form protocols for trials and studies were kept before that time. [28134]

Mr. Arbuthnot: This is a matter for the chief executive of the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment. I have asked him to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Ken Livingstone, dated 8 May 1996:

I have been asked to reply to your question about written protocols for the service volunteer programme at the former Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment since this falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency which includes CBD within one of its divisions.

Procedures for standardised, formal written protocols were implemented in 1991 during the establishment of the Independent Ethics Committee. This followed from the recommendations of the Royal College of Physicians' Guidelines for Ethics Committees (updated in 1990) and was introduced as part of Porton Down's continuing commitment to follow best practice for carrying out their work. For many years prior to the introduction of these new arrangements scientific staff produced written protocols of the studies they proposed conducting but these were not constructed to a standard pattern.

I hope this information is helpful.

Sarin

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what studies have been carried out by the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment to evaluate the long-term health effects of short-term exposure to the nerve agent Sarin; when these studies were carried out; and what were the conclusions of these studies. [28135]

Mr. Arbuthnot: This is a matter for the chief executive of the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment. I have asked him to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Ken Livingstone, dated 8 May 1996:

I have been asked to reply to your question about studies on health effects after exposure to Sarin carried out by the former Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment since this falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency which incudes CBD Sector in one of its divisions.

No studies have been carried out by the Porton Down specifically to evaluate the long-term health effects on humans of short-term exposure to the nerve agent Sarin.

As part of the research programme to develop improved methods for providing protection and therapy against the effects of chemical warfare agents a study has been conducted using the technique of single fibre electromyography (SFEMG). This study involved taking SFEMG measurements at intervals up to 30 months after the exposure of volunteers to a low level of the nerve agent Sarin.

Small changes in SFEMG were seen at 3 hours and 3 days after exposure to a level of Sarin which caused a reduction in the volunteers' red cell acetyl cholinesterase activity to 60% of normal levels. The SFEMG changes were not accompanied by any clinical neuromuscular symptoms or signs and had returned to normal two years after exposure.

This work, which began in 1983, involved eight volunteers. The results of the study have been submitted for publication in the open literature.

I hope this information is helpful.

Devonport Dockyard

Mr. Hicks: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) when he plans to finalise the contract for the building and construction work at Devonport dockyard to accommodate the refitting of Trident submarines; when he expects this work to commence; and what is the estimated cost; [28052]

(2) when he plans to finalise the contract for the refitting of Trident submarines at Devonport dockyard. [28053]

Mr. Arbuthnot: We plan to finalise the contract for construction of the future nuclear refitting facilities at Devonport by the end of the summer; construction is scheduled to start in early 1998. Certain contractual details, including price, remain subject to negotiation and are commercially confidential. Contracts for individual refits of Vanguard class submarine will be negotiated with the dockyard operator in advance of the commencement of each refit. The Vanguard class refitting programme is planned to commence around the turn of the century.

Rosyth Dockyard

Mr. Hicks: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the cost to public funds of providing facilities at Rosyth dockyard for the refitting of aircraft carriers. [28054]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The existing facilities at Rosyth are suitable for refitting aircraft carriers without significant additional expenditure; further discussions about precise requirements will take place with the dockyard operator well in advance of the first refit.

HMS Fearless and HMS Intrepid

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects HMS Fearless and HMS Intrepid to be permanently taken out of service. [28283]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The timing of the decommissioning of HMS Fearless and Intrepid has yet to be finalised. A decision will not be made until the conclusion of the current negotiations with VSEL for the design and build of up to two new amphibious ships.

Landing Platform Docks

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are the reasons for the time taken to order two landing platform docks; and if he will make a statement. [28281]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The "no acceptable price no contract" negotiations for an order for up to two LPD(R) are continuing with VSEL. The size and timing of any order is dependent upon a satisfactory outcome to these negotiations.

Dr. Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what assessment he has made of Britain's amphibious capability; [28280]

(2) what assessment he has made of his Department's provision of an amphibious capability until the landing platform docks come into operational service. [28282]

Mr. Soames: The Royal Navy retains a substantial capability to conduct amphibious operations in support of our defence policy objectives. Our amphibious forces are supported by specialist ships which are regularly maintained to sustain their operational capability. Both HMS Fearless and Intrepid have recently completed maintenance periods. Our amphibious capability will be significantly enhanced by the new helicopter carrier, HMS Ocean, which is currently fitting out, and by the refit of the landing ship logistic Sir Bedivere.

Louise Jensen

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has received, and from whom, in relation to the death in Cyprus of Louise Jensen. [28412]

Mr. Soames: My Department has received a number of representations from hon. Members and others relating to this terrible incident.

Ministry of Defence Police (Radios)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the control rooms in each police constabulary which Ministry of Defence police may *(a)* broadcast to and *(b)* receive calls from, via their personal radios. [27808]

Mr. Maclean *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* I have between asked to reply.

Where necessary, local arrangements exist to enable Ministry of Defence police officers to be in two-way radio contact with Home Office constabularies. I am aware that the following forces in England and Wales have entered into such local arrangements:

Avon and Somerset
Cheshire
Devon and Cornwall
Dorset
Essex
Gloucestershire
Gwent
Hampshire
Kent
Lancashire
Merseyside
Metropolitan
North Wales
North Yorkshire
South Wales
Staffordshire
Suffolk
Surrey
Sussex
Thames Valley
Wiltshire

CORRIGENDUM

This question and answer should have appeared in the *Official Report* for Friday 26 April.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Elections

Mr. Coe: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps he is taking for the holding of elections in Northern Ireland for the purpose of providing delegates to the proposed forum for the discussion of issues relevant to promoting dialogue and understanding in Northern Ireland. [27148]

Sir Patrick Mayhew: Now that the Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiations, etc.) Bill has received its Second Reading in the House of Commons, on 18 April, thereby indicating parliamentary support for the Bill, I have informed the chief electoral officer for Northern Ireland and my officials that they may commence preparations for the proposed elections on 30 May.

This will involve urgent expenditure to meet the cost of conducting the elections, including the recruitment of staff, staff training and equipment as well as costs associated with advertising and publicity for the elections. It will also cover the initial costs of setting up and servicing the forum and negotiations as well as expenditure on allowances for delegates. Its urgency arises from the need to commence, at the earliest opportunity, preparations for the successful conduct of these elections.

Parliamentary approval for this new service will be sought in a summer supplementary estimate for the Northern Ireland Office's administration, law, order, protective and miscellaneous services vote, class XV, vote 1. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £1,790,000 will be met be repayable advances from the contingencies fund.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 9 May 1996

TRANSPORT

Office Space

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the square footage and cost of office space rented by his Department and its agencies and the number of his Department or agencies' buildings partly, or fully unoccupied together with the square footage of that unoccupied office space and its estimated rental value where available in each of the past five financial years. [27719]

Mr. Norris: My Department occupies 3,893,000sq ft of office space with an annual rental cost of £22,117,000.

This includes 109,000sq ft of fully or partly unoccupied office space in eight buildings with an annual rental cost of £420,000.

My Department does not hold reliable information for past years.

Railway Bridges

Ms Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many of Railtrack's structures are subject to overstress above levels acceptable by his Department. [28268]

Mr. Watts: Railtrack has weight capacity obligations under the Transport Act 1968 in respect of bridges carrying highways over the railway. Railtrack has estimated that around 10 per cent. of such bridges owned by it do not meet the weight capacity obligations and estimates the total cost of strengthening these bridges to meet it to be £200 million, of which £150 million is likely to be spent during the period ending 31 March 2004. Railtrack will review this estimate in the light of an assessment of highway overbridges that it is presently carrying out on behalf of local authorities, in consequence of an EU directive which requires the United Kingdom to admit 40 tonne vehicles from 1 January 1999.

Ms Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many of Railtrack's bridges have a structural assessment indicating a life of *(a)* up to one year, *(b)* one to three years, *(c)* three to five years and *(d)* over five years. [28270]

Mr. Watts: Structural assessment is the process by which the safe load of a structure is established and does not itself indicate residual life. Railtrack's rigorous inspection process is designed to discover incipient defects in structures before their integrity is threatened so that preventive action can be taken in good time.

Ms Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) how many bridges are owned by Railtrack; and how many of these have a valid up to date structural assessment; [28224]

(2) what estimate has been made of how long it would take to obtain up to date structural assessments for all of Railtrack's bridges, and of the cost involved. [28226]

Mr. Watts: Railtrack owns around 40,000 bridges, viaducts and tunnels. These structures currently have assessments in compliance with long-standing policies. Railtrack has published more stringent standards covering bridge assessments and is assessing bridges to calculate their strength on a priority basis over an 18-year cycle.

Ms Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many bridge reconstructions Railtrack plans to carry out over the next 10 years. [28222]

Mr. Watts: In the period to 2004 Railtrack plans to renew 913 bridge spans, excluding those that are part of stations and depots.

Ms Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if Railtrack has up to date scour assessments for each of its bridges and other structures which could be affected by flooding. [28554]

Mr. Watts: I understand that Railtrack does have such assessments.

British Rail Property Sales

Ms Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what were the total proceeds from British Rail property sales in each of the last five years. [28552]

Mr. Watts: The total proceeds from property sales after deduction of sale expenses are as follows:

	£ million
1991–92	43.7
1992–93	33.8
1993–94	107.7
1994–95	39.9
1995–96	[1]42.5
Total	267.6

[1] Subject to audit.

Port of Tyne Authority

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many written representations have been received by him in respect of the Port of Tyne Authority scheme 1996; and of these how many expressed *(a)* opposition to and *(b)* support for the proposed privatisation of the port of Tyne; and if he will place copies of the representations in the Library. [28310]

Mr. Norris: A total of 134 written representations have been received in respect of the proposed privatisation of the Port of Tyne Authority. Three were in favour, one was purely technical and did not express a view, and 130 were opposed.

The Port of Tyne Authority's notice concerning representations did not suggest that they would be made available other than to the Secretary of State, the authority, and its parliamentary agents, and they are therefore not being otherwise released.

Traffic Director for London

Mr. Carrington: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he has decided on the appointment of the Traffic Director for London; and if he will make a statement. [29182]

Mr. Norris: I am pleased to confirm that Derek Turner has been reappointed as Traffic Director for London from 9 May 1996 at a salary of £75,000. His primary objective remains to have the red route network substantially operational by 2000.

Official Hospitality

Mr. Tony Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how much was spent on official hospitality by his Department and all associated agencies in the financial year 1995–96. [28564]

Mr. Norris: The table represents the expenditure on official hospitality by the Department, central transport group, and its associated agencies in the financial year 1995–96. The figure for the central transport group may include some non-entertainment costs which cannot readily be disaggregated.

	£
Central Transport Group	170,704
Driving Standards Agency	3,009
Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency	10,546
Marine Safety Agency	17,740
The Coastguard Agency	7,906
Vehicle Certification Agency	1,280
Vehicle Inspectorate	46,000
The Highways Agency	4,097

The total amount spent by the Department and its agencies for the financial year 1995–96 was £261,282.64.

Sea Empress

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the countries who volunteered equipment, personnel and supplies and other aid for Milford Haven during the Sea Empress disaster; and if he will make a statement. [27554]

Mr. Norris: A number of specific offers of assistance were received by the marine pollution control unit from a number of companies and organisations, some of them foreign based. In addition the MPCU received direct offers of assistance from the Governments of the Netherlands, France and Germany.

Highway Bridges

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how much money has been committed by his Department for the carrying out of assessments required to plan for the strengthening of bridges required under European Union regulations *(a)* for each local authority in England and *(b)* for England indicating the sum committed for 1994–95, 1995–96 and 1996–97 and showing the totals as a percentage of overall local authority budgets; and if he will make a statement. [28157]

Mr. Norris: Local authorities receive a single allocation for both the assessment and the strengthening of their highway bridges. In 1996–97, for the first time, an element within this allocation was separately identified for assessment, but it remains open to local authorities to determine their own priorities within the total allocation. The first three columns of the following table show total bridge allocations for 1994–95, 1995–96 and 1996–97 respectively. The final column shows the indicative assessment allocations made in 1996–97. The information required to express these as a percentage of overall local authority budgets is not readily available.

Allocations for Assessment and Strengthening of Bridges

	[1]1994–95	[1]1995–96	[1]1996–97	[2]1996–97
Total allocations for England				
England	137,000	122,438	103,096	28,176
Allocations by local authority				
City of London	610	496	622	207
Barking	139	125	146	46
Barnet	485	200	140	40
Bexley	852	742	458	50
Brent	830	200	220	120
Bromley	183	360	180	80
Camden	1,945	1,372	320	160
Croydon	77	172	225	125
Ealing	158	126	123	23
Enfield	1,059	1,436	1,070	370
Greenwich	569	660	284	110
Hackney	891	555	245	145
Hammersmith	2,153	1,164	530	230
Haringey	424	720	416	22
Harrow	571	1,245	395	170
Havering	239	340	277	228
Hillingdon	939	1,046	1,030	130
Hounslow	701	1,045	790	50
Islington	471	1,490	907	100
Kensington	30	122	300	0
Kingston	330	2,500	2,560	10
Lambeth	465	831	585	185
Lewisham	114	179	410	60
Merton	64	117	120	60
Newham	5,960	2,437	1,600	100
Redbridge	557	200	150	50
Richmond	462	400	185	85
Southwark	361	1,088	747	40
Sutton	285	376	244	144
Tower Hamlets	414	943	734	27
Waltham Forest	235	178	382	227
Wandsworth	3,600	764	765	325
Westminister	2,165	3,301	2,786	136
Bath and North-East Somerset	n/a	n/a	735	64
Bristol	n/a	n/a	934	245
North Somerset	n/a	n/a	304	66
South Gloucestshire	n/a	n/a	162	82
Hartlepool	n/a	n/a	18	18
Middlesbrough	n/a	n/a	702	37
Redcar and Cleveland	n/a	n/a	237	47
Stockton	n/a	n/a	200	57
East Riding	n/a	n/a	518	185
Hull	n/a	n/a	538	110
North-East Lincolnshire	n/a	n/a	176	70
North Lincolnshire	n/a	n/a	402	70
North Yorkshire	n/a	n/a	1,744	888
York	n/a	n/a	206	82
Bolton	1,223	2,264	990	180
Bury	1,032	425	484	56
Manchester	2,150	1,620	1,266	367
Oldham	2,060	1,346	1,190	207
Rochdale	1,062	1,866	2,392	150
Salford	768	892	910	189
Stockport	2,350	1,284	1,378	222
Tameside	492	363	584	80
Trafford	214	804	1,134	121
Wigan	385	547	510	120
Knowsley	283	157	322	84

Allocations for Assessment and Strengthening of Bridges

	[1]1994–95	[1]1995–96	[1]1996–97	[2]1996–97
Liverpool	616	508	726	202
St. Helens	176	90	715	97
Sefton	363	328	510	176
Wirral	319	596	583	60
Barnsley	823	546	562	158
Doncaster	1,558	2,169	1,162	280
Rotherham	966	966	984	80
Sheffield	3,071	3,608	1,945	479
Gateshead	224	422	308	118
Newcastle	211	1,251	1,514	88
North Tyneside	408	288	557	55
South Tyneside	318	318	496	68
Sunderland	493	342	582	201
Birmingham	2,163	1,500	1,084	180
Coventry	828	743	741	129
Dudley	501	432	454	50
Sandwell	2,932	2,516	1,105	162
Solihull	240	214	271	75
Walsall	2,228	1,073	986	58
Wolverhampton	3,538	2,788	1,100	149
Bradford	3,247	2,177	1,106	477
Calderdale	622	622	494	160
Kirklees	1,078	890	556	124
Leeds	2,006	1,311	1,020	402
Wakefield	1,188	939	680	129
Avon	2,211	1,789	n/a	n/a
Bedfordshire	1,530	2,137	986	277
Berkshire	850	823	1,114	305
Buckinghamshire	478	818	758	282
Cambridgeshire	1,462	1,462	1,433	266
Cheshire	3,358	3,283	2,341	700
Cleveland	1,338	382	n/a	n/a
Cornwall	1,970	1,870	1,340	675
Cumbria	1,342	910	1,256	400
Derbyshire	1,126	976	1,294	629
Devon	1,432	1,382	1,290	625
Dorset	784	1,067	1,160	495
Durham	1,727	1,103	1,727	205
East Sussex	1,277	1,085	1,144	250
Essex	2,207	1,655	1,540	684
Gloucestershire	996	656	1,030	365
Hampshire	1,111	1,112	1,331	666
Herefordshire/ Worcestershire	779	661	759	283
Hertfordshire	1,800	1,513	1,286	430
Humberside	1,183	1,084	n/a	n/a
Isle of Wight	132	97	197	7
Kent	2,344	2,334	1,456	600
Lancashire	5,990	4,866	2,356	1,500
Leicestershire	1,124	1,008	922	257
Lincolnshire	1,752	1,080	1,261	452
Norfolk	3,413	2,457	2,021	828
Northamptonshire	1,059	999	890	225
Northumbria	3,745	2,684	1,548	216
North Yorkshire	2,588	2,186	1,744	888
Nottinghamshire	1,403	1,451	1,580	578
Oxon	1,133	1,088	1,071	406
Shropshire	1,264	1,215	1,055	342
Somerset	1,690	1,893	1,487	536
Staffordshire	1,630	1,300	964	300
Suffolk	2,166	1,768	1,249	250
Surrey	4,291	3,686	1,641	690
Warwickshire	1,380	994	1,270	414
West Sussex	354	312	951	540
Wiltshire	117	117	1,165	689

[1] Assessment and strengthening.

[2] Assessment only.

Public Transport Fares (London)

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what percentage of *(a)* London underground fares and *(b)* London bus fares will be capped as a result of his consultation on transport in London; [28417]

(2) what estimate he has made of the loss of revenue to London Transport resulting from the proposed capping of fares in transport in London; [28416]

(3) what are the implications of his consultation on transport in London for the price of London Transport travelcards; [28415]

(4) what additional funding he plans to provide for London Transport following his decision to cap transport fares in London. [28418]

Mr. Norris: The London travelcard, excluding one-day tickets, is included in the range of fares subject to the franchising director's policy on passenger rail fares. There is no capping regime for other London Transport fares. However, as its document "A Transport Strategy for London" indicates, the Government believe that in future LT fares are likely to rise more in line with inflation than with earnings, implying average fares increases lower than in recent years. LT's revenue forecasts will continue to be taken into account in considering LT's funding requirements.

Vessels

Mr. Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he proposes to issue his Department's consultation document on sub-standard and uninsured vessels; and if he will make a statement. [28472]

Mr. Norris: In the near future.

Salvage Tugs

Mr. Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans his Department has to enter into contracts for salvage tugs to be stationed at Stornoway and Dover during the winter months of 1996–97. [28474]

Mr. Norris: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Stoke on Trent, North (Ms Walley) on 18 March, *Official Report*, column *40*.

Mr. Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what evaluation he has made of the stationing of salvage tugs at Stornoway and Dover during the winter months of 1995–96; and if he will make a statement. [28473]

Mr. Norris: The two tugs completed their 1995–96 trial on 30 April. The results are currently being analysed.

ENVIRONMENT

Office Space

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list the square footage and cost of office space rented by his Department and its agencies and the number of his Department or agencies' buildings partly, or fully unoccupied together with the square footage of that unoccupied office space and its estimated rental value where available in each of the past five financial years. [27729]

Sir Paul Beresford: Prior to 1 April 1996, office accommodation on the civil estate was managed centrally by Property Holdings not by individual Departments. The information for the years requested is therefore not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

On 1 April my Department inherited from Property Holdings responsibility for the management of 1.4 million sq. ft. of rented office space in 100 buildings at a total cost of some £25 million in rents and rates of 1995–96 levels. Vacant office space totalled some 150,000 sq ft in 10 buildings at an estimated cost of £2.2 million for 1996–97, if none is occupied.

My Department also sponsors two crown bodies—the Buildings Research Establishment and the Health and Safety Executive—whose properties were not managed by Property Holdings. The information requested in respect of these bodies is as follows:

	1991–92	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*
BRE					
Square footage	19,786	19,786	19,786	19,786	19,786
Cost (£000s)	74	80	80	94	94
HSE					
Square footage	1,042,487	1,042,487	1,098,223	1,098,223	1,033,455
Cost (£000s)	6,603	7,729	8,155	9,173	8,836

The buildings used by these bodies have been fully occupied throughout the relevant period.

Air Pollution

Sir Graham Bright: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what assessment he has made of the costs to public funds of *(a)* health care and *(b)* clean-up measures from pollution from diesel vehicles. [28178]

Mr. Clappison: Diesel vehicles emit a number of pollutants. Of these the pollutant most strongly linked with health effects is particulate matter less than 10 microns across—PM10. During winter episodes in most major United Kingdom cities the dominant contribution of primary PM10 comes from road traffic, notably from diesel-powered vehicles, increasing from about a quarter to in excess of 70 per cent. It is difficult to estimate precisely the effects on health of particles from diesel vehicles. Healthy individuals are unlikely to be affected by levels of PM10 found in ambient air in the United Kingdom. However, there is growing evidence of a link between PM10 and premature mortality, hospital admissions and ill-health in those with pre-existing heart or lung conditions.

Pollutants from road traffic, including diesel vehicles, have other environmental impacts, for instance soiling of buildings caused mainly by particulate elemental carbon. It has been estimated[1] that in the financial year 1990–91 the UK stone cleaning market had a value of £79 million.

[1] Mansfield T (1992) Sources of Building Soiling and a Review of the Stone Cleaning Industry 1991, International Conference on Stone Cleaning, Edinburgh.

Sir Graham Bright: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what powers local authorities have to set pollution limits for vehicles used to undertake local authority services. [28179]

Mr. Clappison: Statutory emission limits for new vehicles and for those in service are set by the Secretary of State for Transport and approved by Parliament. Local authorities have no special powers to impose different limits. It would be a matter for a local authority should it wish to set separate conditions for vehicles undertaking a local service, provided these did not breach compulsory competitive tendering requirements.

Sir Graham Bright: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment (1) how many airborne particulates monitoring sites there are in the United Kingdom; [28180]

(2) what are the current levels of airborne particulates as measured in the United Kingdom. [28181]

Mr. Clappison: There are currently 22 sites in the Department of the Environment's national automatic monitoring network which measure fine particulate matter—PM10. A further 26 PM10 monitors will be added to the network by the end of 1996, bringing the total number of PM10 sites to 48. The Department also, in co-operation with local authorities, monitors particles in the form of smoke at 225 sites throughout the UK.

In 1995, the annual average mean concentration of PM10, measured at the 16 national automatic urban monitoring sites in operation, ranged from 20 to 28 microgrammes per metre cubed. The maximum 24 hour running average concentration at the same sites ranged from 68 to 395 microgrammes per metre cubed. The average annual average concentration of smoke at 225 sites between April 1994 and March 1995 was 9 microgrammes per cubic metre. The maximum daily average smoke concentration during this period ranged from 9 to 263 microgrammes per cubic metre.

Current concentrations of PM10 from the national automatic monitoring network are updated hourly on the Internet (http://www.open.gov.uk/doe/doehome.htm).

Fire Service Pension Scheme

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what plans he has to place the funding of the fire service pension scheme outside the capping criteria; and if he will make a statement. [28248]

Sir Paul Beresford: We have no plans to place the funding of the fire service pension scheme outside the capping criteria. Any decisions on capping criteria for 1997–98 will be considered in the context of the local government finance settlement.

Official Hospitality

Mr. Tony Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how much was spent on official hospitality by his Department and all associated agencies in the financial year 1995–96. [28570]

Sir Paul Beresford: Total expenditure by my Department and its agencies, including the residual

functions of Property Services Agency services, in 1995–96 is expected to be £107,000. This does not include the agencies which transferred to the Office of Public Service on 1 January 1996. I also refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service today.

Purchase Grant Scheme

Mr. Merchant: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment (1) when he intends to consult on detailed proposals covering the remaining counties of England to exempt small rural settlements from the purchase grant scheme; and if he will make a statement; [28956]

(2) when he intends to consult on detailed proposals covering the remaining counties of England to exempt small rural settlements from the purchase grant scheme; and if he will make a statement. [29183]

Mr. Curry: In March we issued a consultation paper on how we propose to exempt small rural settlements in England from the new purchase grant scheme. The paper set out the way we propose to implement the designation in England, and invited comments on our general approach, and on the detailed proposals for the first 15 counties and areas. Comments were sought from local authorities, housing associations, rural groups and other interested parties.

Today we issued a supplement to that paper, which gives detailed proposals for a further 15 counties or areas, covering Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly; Cumbria; Devon; Durham; Gloucestershire; Greater Manchester; Hampshire; Hereford and Worcester; Hertfordshire; Humberside; Isle of Wight; Kent; Shropshire; Oxfordshire and Wiltshire.

We will also consult on the remaining areas of England shortly.

Copies of the consultation paper have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. Copies of papers for each individual county or area providing copies of any maps needed have also been placed in both Libraries.

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if the Environment Agency has now prepared its code on enforcement practice. [29042]

Mr. Clappison: The Environment Agency's code on enforcement practice was adopted on 23 April and copies have been placed in the Library of the House. It takes the form of a statement of enforcement policy which sets out how the agency will operate, and detailed guidance for warranted officers, setting out their responsibilities. The documents will be revised over time in the light of experience and comments from all the agency's customers.

Animal Feedstuffs

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what regulations govern the inclusion of cement dust in animal feedstuffs. [27342]

Mrs. Browning: I have been asked to reply.

There are no regulations controlling the specific use of cement dust in animal feedingstuffs. However, under the Agriculture Act 1970, it is an offence to sell, or have in possession with a view to sale, any material which is deleterious to animals or, through the consumption of animal products, deleterious to human beings. The Feeding Stuffs Regulations 1995, made under part IV of the 1970 Act, contain detailed provisions including controls on contaminants to feedingstuffs.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Solicitors' Indemnity Fund

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the solicitors' indemnity fund. [27564]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: The solicitors indemnity fund, which provides compulsory insurance cover for all solicitors, was established under section 37 of the Solicitors Act 1974. The Act empowers the Law Society to make rules concerning indemnity against loss arising from any kind of civil liability, although most claims arise from allegations of negligence. The most recent rules are the Solicitors Indemnity Rules 1992.

Personal Injury Insurance Compensation

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the maximum time after which personal injury insurance compensation may no longer be pursued; and what plans he has to alter this period. [27904]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: The limitation period in respect of claims between an insurer and an insured person arising out of their contract is six years, subject to any stipulation in the contract to the contrary. The normal period in respect of claims for compensation for personal injury against the person causing the injury is three years from the date on which the cause of action accrued or the date of the plaintiff's knowledge. The Law Commission is at present reviewing limitation periods generally.

Justices of the Peace

Mr. Cox: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the present number of *(a)* men and *(b)* women from ethnic minority communities who are justices of the peace, serving courts in the Greater London area. [27953]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: Information is only available in respect of three of the six Greater London commissions of the peace.

	Male	*Female*	*Total*
City of London	1	3	4
Inner London	67	45	112
Middlesex	Not available	—	144

No information is currently available in respect of the North-East, South-East and South-West London commissions.

TREASURY

Privatisation

Mr. Austin Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer in how many privatisations Bayesian probability theory was used in the analysis of maintenance costs of the capital equipment being privatised; and if he will make a statement on the value of the theory in assessing investment needs of *(a)* public and *(b)* private industries. [27938]

Mr. Jack: Information required to determine the number of privatisations in which Bayesian probability theory was used could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. Bayesian probability theory is an established modelling technique relevant to determining estimates of maintenance expenditure for companies with a large capital base. It is not for HM Government to express a view of the value attributable to the use of Bayesian probability theory by private industries.

European Parliament (New Buildings)

Mr. Stewart: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the cost to the United Kingdom of the European Parliament's new buildings in Brussels and Strasbourg in the next year. [28315]

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I assume my hon. Friend is referring to 1997. The cost of the European Parliament's new buildings for the forthcoming year are established only following the annual budget negotiations. We will not know the cost of these buildings until the 1997 EC budget is adopted in December.

Suicides

Mr. Touhig: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many suicides in the United Kingdom involved the use of *(a)* a firearm and *(b)* a shotgun in (i) 1980, (ii) 1985, (iii) 1992, (iv) 1993, (v) 1994 and (vi) 1995. [28260]

Mrs. Angela Knight: The number of suicides—ICD [1]E955.0–E955.4 and E985.0–E985.4—in the United Kingdom involving the use of *(a)* a firearm and *(b)* a shotgun in 1980, 1985, 1992, 1993 and 1994 are shown in the table. Data for 1995–96 are not yet available.

Suicides in the United Kingdom involving the use of firearm and a shotgun in 1980, 1985, 1992, 1993 and 1994

	1980	*1985*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*
Suicides and self-inflicted injury by firearm including shotgun	255	257	206	205	193
Suicides and self-inflicted injury by shotgun only	85	107	98	101	96
Injury by firearm including shotgun undetermined whether accidentally or purposely inflicted	25	38	24	20	24
Injury by shotgun only undetermined whether accidentally or purposely inflicted	10	13	9	9	12

[1] International Classification of Diseases, 9th Revision.

Codes E995.0–E955.4 refer to deaths where suicide is the underlying cause of death, whereas codes E985.0–E985.4 relate to deaths where it is undetermined whether the injury was accidentally or purposely inflicted. The majority of these, however, are generally regarded to be suicide.

Deaths in England and Wales for 1992 and earlier years represent the number of deaths registered in each year, while deaths from 1993 are deaths which occurred in each year.

Deaths in Scotland and Northern Ireland represent the number of deaths registered in every year.

Hourly Earnings

Mr. Timms: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many employees in (i) England and (ii) Great Britain earned *(a)* less than £1.50 per hour, *(b)* between £1.50 and £2.50 per hour, *(c)* between £2.50 and £3.50 per hour, *(d)* between £100,000 and per £250,000 per annum and *(e)* more than £250,000 per annum in 1995; and if he will list his projections for 1996. [28584]

Mrs Angela Knight: Information from the New Earnings Survey, April 1995 is shown in the table. Projections for April are not available.

New Earnings Survey, April 1995
Employees on adult rates, whose pay for the survey period was not affected by absence

	England	*Great Britain*
Percentage of employees earning less than £1.50 per hour (excluding overtime)	0.6	0.6
Percentage of employees earning between £1.50 and £2.50 per hour (excluding overtime)	1.0	1.0
Percentage of employees earning between £2.50 and £3.50 per hour (excluding overtime)	7.2	7.3
Percentage of employees earnings between £100,000 and £250,000 per annum	0.1	0.1
Percentage of employees earning more than £250,000 per annum	<0.1	<0.1

Profit-related Pay

Mr. Timms: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what is the average marginal rate of tax used in calculating the cost of tax relief on profit-related pay; [28541]

(2) what is his most recent estimate of the cost of tax relief for profit-related pay for the tax year 1996–97. [28540]

Mr. Jack: The cost of income tax relief for profit-related pay schemes is approximately estimated on the assumption that the distribution of participants by marginal rate of tax is similar to that for employees generally. The average marginal rate of tax for employees in 1996–97 will be about 27 per cent.

Estimates of the cost of income tax relief for PRP tax relief for PRP schemes are published annually in table 1.6 of "Inland Revenue Statistics", copies of which are in the Library. An estimate of the cost in 1996–97 is not yet available.

Paracetamol Poisoning

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many deaths relating to paracetamol poisoning have been reported to the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys in each of the last five years. [27761]

Mrs. Angela Knight: The number of deaths from paracetamol poisoning reported to the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys—the Office for National Statistics from 1 April 1996 following the merger with the Central Statistical Office—in 1993 and 1994 is shown in the table.

The data for 1990–1992 are published, for each year separately, in table 10 of "Mortality statistics: injury and poisoning, England and Wales", Series DH4, nos 16–18, copies of which may be accessed in the House of Commons Library.

Deaths from Paracetamol in England and Wales 1993 and 1994

	1993	*1994*
Deaths by poisoning—accident	60 (14)	56 (14)
Paracetamol only	42 (8)	36 (9)
Paracetamol and other drugs	18 (6)	20 (5)
Deaths by poisoning—suicide	155 (22)	119 (12)
Paracetamol only	65 (6)	61 (4)
Paracetamol and other drugs	90 (16)	58 (8)
Deaths by poisoning—undetermined	89 (13)	79 (8)
Paracetamol only	59 (3)	49 (5)
Paracetamol and other drugs	30(10)	30 (3)

The figures in brackets indicate the number of paracetamol deaths with a mention of alcohol.

Custody Services

Mr. John Greenway: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will extend the scope of the Financial Services Act 1986 to cover regulation of custody services following the consultation carried out by the Securities and Investments Board. [28959]

Mrs. Angela Knight: I have accepted the recommendation of the Securities and Investments Board that the scope of the Act should be extended to those custody services covering the safekeeping and administration of investments. I believe that this will extend investor protection but am also concerned that it should not impose disproportionate burdens on authorised firms. I shall accordingly be seeking views on the terms in which the Act should be extended in a consultation paper which I hope will be issued shortly.

Stamp Duty (Unit Trusts)

Mr. Carrington: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what stamp duty treatment he proposes for conversions of authorised unit trusts into open-ended investment companies. [28957]

Mrs. Angela Knight: In response to the consultative document which the Treasury published last year with draft regulations to permit the creation of open-ended investment companies—OEICs—the Treasury has received a number of representations that conversions of authorised unit trusts into OEICs should be exempted from stamp duty and stamp duty reserve tax—SDRT—including conversions of two or more trusts into a single OEIC.

When regulations are made to deal with the stamp duty and SDRT treatment of OEICs, I intend to include in them an exemption for conversions of an authorised unit trust into an OEIC or a single sub-fund of an umbrella OEIC. The regulations will also contain an exemption from stamp duty and SDRT, for a period of some two years, for conversions which involve a merger, such as the conversion of two or more authorised unit trusts into a single OEIC or sub-fund, or the merger of an authorised unit trust with an OEIC.

We also intend to introduce legislation in the next Finance Bill to exempt mergers between authorised unit trusts from stamp duty and SDRT if the merger is carried out after the Bill becomes law and within a period of some two years thereafter.

These measures will give unit trust groups a unique opportunity to rationalise their range of authorised unit trusts, and to convert some or all of them into OEICs if they wish. At the same time, the introduction of OEICs will continue to widen the opportunities for share ownership for the investing public.

Official Hospitality

Mr. Tony Banks: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much was spent on official hospitality by his Department and all associated agencies in the financial year 1995–96. [28574]

Mrs. Angela Knight: Expenditure on official hospitality by HM Treasury and associated agencies responsible to the Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1995–96 is included in the published running costs.

SCOTLAND

Closed Circuit Television

Mr. Foulkes: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland which towns in Scotland currently have closed circuit television to assist with crime prevention; which will have schemes installed during 1996; what is his policy regarding further expansion of such schemes; if he will make further financial assistance available; and if he will make a statement. [27914]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The towns which currently have CCTV installations are:

Aberdeen
Airdrie
Alloa
Ayr
Bathgate
Bearsden
Carnoustie
Coatbridge
Dalkeith
Dumfries
Falkirk
Galashiels
Glasgow
Glenrothes
Grangemouth
Hamilton
Inverness
Kilmarnock
Kirkcaldy
Kirkintilloch
Levenmouth
Milngavie
Motherwell
Paisley
Stirling
Wishaw

Towns which will have CCTV installed in 1996 are Nairn, Perth and Dundee. Towns planning to install CCTV, or to expand existing schemes, will shortly be submitting applications for funding from the Scottish Office closed circuit television challenge competition, which I announced on 13 December 1995. Some £4 million has been made available for the competition over the next three years—£1 million in 1996–97 and £1.5 million in 1997–98 and 1998–99. This will make a significant contribution to making further reductions in crime and the fear of crime in Scotland.

Health Boards

Mr. Foulkes: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what allocations he has made of bridging finance for health care to each of the health boards in Scotland; and if he will make a statement. [27915]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The total amount of bridging finance allocations issued to each of the health boards in Scotland in the financial years 1991–92 to 1995–96 are as shown:

Health Board	*Allocation (£ million)*
Argyll and Clyde	3.023
Ayrshire and Arran	2.051
Borders	0.791
Dumfries and Galloway	0.332
Fife	2.846
Forth Valley	1.791
Grampian	7.542
Greater Glasgow	18.083
Highland	3.936
Lanarkshire	3.616
Lothian	9.641
Orkney	0.210
Shetland	0.047
Tayside	2.182
Western Isles	0.497
Total	56.588

Bridging finance continues to be an effective way of facilitating the Government's care in the community policies.

Old People's Homes

Mr. Foulkes: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will give the number of places in *(a)* old people's homes and *(b)* nursing homes in the private, public and voluntary sectors for each of the new council areas in Scotland as at 1 April, indicating for each the vacancies. [27916]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The latest available information is for 30 September 1995 and is set out in the table:

	Residential care homes						*Nursing homes*	
	Local authority		*Private*		*Voluntary*			
New council area	*Number of beds*	*Percentage vacant*	*Number of beds*	*Percentage vacant*	*Number of beds*	*Percentage vacant*	*Number of beds*	*Percentage vacant*
Aberdeen City	364	10.4	22	0.0	378	7.4	715	6.0
Aberdeenshire	376	8.8	89	15.7	168	13.1	985	10.5
Angus	197	11.2	346	13.3	72	0.0	541	8.5
Argyll and Bute	173	10.4	433	10.9	72	15.3	303	9.6
Clackmannanshire	32	0.0	0	—	12	0.0	100	6.0
Dumfries and Galloway	274	5.1	271	23.0	99	13.1	519	7.5
Dundee City	401	4.2	152	8.6	184	15.8	650	26.2
East Ayrshire	127	0.8	71	9.9	79	2.5	775	17.4
East Dunbartonshire	40	0.0	15	0.0	31	0.0	195	8.7
East Lothian	169	7.7	80	3.7	100	10.0	396	8.2
East Renfrewshire	43	27.9	57	6.4	105	3.8	620	6.1
Edinburgh, City of	618	7.4	233	5.0	612	11.8	1,755	12.9
Falkirk	214	9.3	63	7.9	50	8.0	446	6.3
Fife	432	8.6	420	4.9	166	7.8	1,088	21.2
Glasgow, City of	1,202	4.3	289	8.6	570	5.5	2,213	13.9
Highland	370	7.8	495	15.8	222	7.7	1,137	9.0
Inverclyde	64	10.9	69	2.9	103	3.5	245	1.6
Midlothian	160	11.9	42	7.1	68	7.4	383	43.9

New council area	Residential care homes: Local authority Number of beds	Local authority Percentage vacant	Private Number of beds	Private Percentage vacant	Voluntary Number of beds	Voluntary Percentage vacant	Nursing homes Number of beds	Nursing homes Percentage vacant
Moray	171	11.1	58	5.2	46	0.0	189	4.8
North Ayrshire	128	6.2	186	11.0	71	0.0	846	15.3
North Lanarkshire	437	5.9	146	4.4	45	11.1	996	11.5
Orkney Islands	71	5.6	28	21.4	0	—	0	—
Perth and Kinross	240	5.4	328	16.0	192	13.5	787	14.7
Renfrewshire	266	4.9	197	3.0	88	3.4	525	8.6
Scottish Borders	270	10.4	113	8.8	110	10.0	688	19.9
Shetland Islands	61	8.2	0	—	36	5.6	0	—
South Ayrshire	160	5.0	65	4.3	105	1.9	878	6.8
South Lanarkshire	396	9.3	78	5.7	151	10.6	1,734	15.8
Stirling	153	2.6	103	5.8	199	11.1	373	6.7
West Dunbartonshire	257	12.5	30	6.7	38	2.6	63	3.2
West Lothian	215	8.8	22	9.1	8	0.0	514	30.4
Western Isles	182	17.0	6	0.0	14	0.0	65	1.5
Scotland	8,263	7.6	4,507	10.1	4,194	8.4	20,724	13.6

Pre-school Education

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will conduct a survey of day care and pre-school education *(a)* to show how many in each category have (i) outdoor play space for their sole use and (ii) furnishings and fittings of a suitable size for pre-fives and *(b)* to establish whether they have to stow away equipment every day so that others can use the same premises. [27903]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The results of the first survey of provision for day care and pre-school education for young children in Scotland are included in a statistical bulletin published in March by the Scottish Office. Copies were placed in the Library. In deciding whether to register facilities under the Children Act 1989 local authorities have to satisfy themselves on the suitability of place spaces and equipment provided. There are no plans to conduct an additional survey to collect information about such detailed aspects of provision.

Chernobyl (Farms)

Mr. Foulkes: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland which farms in Scotland are subject to restrictions because of fall-out from Chernobyl; what was the total compensation paid to all affected farms in each of the past 10 years; how long it is estimated restrictions will continue in force; what is his estimate of the total future cost involved; and if he will make a statement. [27917]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson: Following the de-restrictions which took effect from 17 January 1996, 36 farms in Scotland remain affected by post-Chernobyl controls on the movement and slaughter of sheep. These farms are located in the following council areas: Stirling, 11 farms; East Ayrshire, 16 farms; East Renfrewshire, three farms; and Dumfries and Galloway, six farms.

The sheep compensation scheme was introduced in July 1986 to compensate farmers whose enterprises had been disrupted as a result of statutory movement and slaughter restrictions. The total paid to date is detailed in the table.

Financial year	Expenditure £
1986–87	1,388,135
1987–88	160,987
1988–89	151,937
1989–90	178,206
1990–91	164,820
1991–92	141,307
1992–93	107,769
1993–94	98,044
1994–95	100,637
1995–96	80,827

Restrictions are reviewed on a regular basis and are removed wherever the monitoring of sheep has revealed residual radioactivity to have declined to within acceptable levels. The downward trend in radiocaesium activity levels is welcome. However, it is not possible to indicate at this time when all restrictions may be removed or to estimate total future costs involved.

Forestry

Mr. Whittingdale: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what proposals he has to improve forestry consultation procedures. [29130]

Mr. Michael Forsyth: In our response to the Environment Committee's report on "Forestry and the Environment" we said that we would ask the Forestry Commission to review its procedures for consulting on planting and felling proposals. The Forestry Commission has now completed this review following consultation with the relevant statutory bodies and a wide range of environmental, land use and forestry organisations.

The review revealed that the Forestry Commission consults on the vast majority of schemes but that consultation results in no substantive comment in most cases. Woodland owners and landowners said that the present procedures are time consuming and expensive and that the application of the procedures to small and non-contentious cases results in unnecessary delays; they said that the Forestry Commission should be able to determine applications in a wider range of circumstances than at present. On the other hand, local authorities, statutory nature conservation, countryside and environment protection bodies and environmental organisations were concerned that any changes to the procedures should not preclude consultation on sensitive cases and that the Forestry Commission should agree the circumstances in which consultation will take place. They were also concerned that the procedures should apply to all types of woodland planting including short rotation coppice and planting on set-aside land.

Since the present arrangements were introduced in 1984 the background against which grant and felling applications are considered has changed considerably. We now have a grant scheme designed to deliver multiple purpose forestry and a series of detailed environmental guidelines. We operate a general presumption against the felling and conversion of woodland to other land uses. Large or very sensitive new planting proposals are subject to statutory environmental assessment. In addition, indicative forestry strategies give local authorities the opportunity to indicate in broad terms those areas which they regard as environmentally sensitive and those where they would like to see forestry positively encouraged. We have also introduced a public register of new planting proposals which enables interested parties to know what is proposed and to submit comments. As we announced in the 1996 sustainable development White Paper—"This Common Inheritance: 1996 UK Annual Report", Cm 3188—the Forestry Commission is preparing a set of forestry standards that we will use as a basis for monitoring and reporting on environmental standards in managed woodland.

Against this background and in the light of the review we have decided to make a number of changes to the procedures.

We believe that the public should be given a greater opportunity to comment on new planning and felling and restocking proposals. We have therefore decided to include felling proposals in the Forestry Commission's public register of applications and to make the register more readily accessible. As well as making the register available for inspection by the public in local authority planning offices the commission will, in due course, arrange for the register to be accessed via the Internet. The commission will also send copies of the register to the relevant statutory bodies. Anyone with an interest in a woodland planting or felling and restocking proposal will be able to comment to the Forestry Commission, which will take account of all the comments it receives in determining an application.

In addition, the Forestry Commission will consult relevant statutory bodies before deciding on new planting proposals in the following circumstances:

- planting proposals that affect a national nature reserve, site of special scientific interest, special protection area designated under the EC wild birds directive or special area for conservation designated under the EC habitats directive; with Scottish Natural Heritage, English Nature or the Countryside Council for Wales;
- planting proposals that affect a scheduled ancient monument; with Historic Scotland, English Heritage or Cadw;
- planting proposals of five hectares or more inside a national park; with the national park authority;
- planting proposals of five hectares or more in a national scenic area, area of outstanding natural beauty or heritage coast; with Scottish Natural Heritage, the Countryside Commission or the Countryside Council for Wales;
- in addition, planting proposals of 10 hectares or more; with the local authority.

These arrangements for consulting on new planting proposals will apply to all types of woodland planting including short rotation coppice and planting on set-aside land.

The Forestry Commission will continue to operate the present arrangements for notifying archaeological authorities of new planting proposals.

Whereas new planting involves a change of land use, felling is part of the on-going business of woodland management and we believe it should be handled with a lighter touch. The Forestry Commission will consult local authorities and the relevant statutory bodies on felling proposals in the following circumstances:

- felling proposals that affect a national nature reserve, site of special scientific interest, special protection area or special area for conservation; with Scottish Natural Heritage, English Nature or the Countryside Council for Wales;
- felling proposals that affect a scheduled ancient monument; with Historic Scotland, English Heritage or Cadw;
- felling proposals that affect trees that are subject to a tree preservation order, with the local authority.

Environmental sensitivity does not depend on size and location alone and there may be circumstances in addition to those I have set out when it will be appropriate for the Forestry Commission to consult local authorities or statutory bodies before determining applications for new planting or felling. The Forestry Commission may therefore agree other, special circumstances when it will consult local authorities or relevant statutory bodies where a local authority or statutory body identifies clear and objective grounds for doing so.

In all those cases where the Forestry Commission consults a local authority or statutory body on a new planting or felling proposal the present arrangements for resolving objections will continue to be applied. In all other cases, the Forestry Commission will determine

applications in the light of any comments it receives, including any views it may decide to solicit from any organisation or individual.

Concern was expressed during the review that the 1984 ministerial direction does not give the Forestry Commission sufficient powers to require new planting and felling proposals to comply with its environmental guidelines before consultation. This has resulted in the Forestry Commission consulting on proposals that do not meet the necessary standard. This wastes time and reduces confidence in the procedures. We have therefore decided that the commission should be able to reject an application at any stage if it does not meet the environmental guidelines or if, in the opinion of the commission, it would be likely to cause significant harm to the environment.

The arrangements that we have announced today will remove unnecessary and unproductive consultation which is wasteful of everyone's time and off-putting to those wishing to plant or manage woodlands. The greater openness we are introducing, together with the Forestry Commission's existing environmental guidelines, statutory environmental assessment for large or very sensitive woodland planting proposals and the forestry standards which the Commission is currently preparing, will allow consultation to be focused on genuinely sensitive cases.

I am confident that the new arrangements will eliminate much of the unnecessary bureaucracy inherent in the present system while, at the same time, maintaining the present high standards of environmental protection. The arrangements will come into effect on 1 August 1996.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group

Sir Jim Lester: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the outcome of the recent meeting of the Commonwealth ministerial action group. [28304]

Mr. Hanley: I have sent a copy of the concluding statement of the second meeting of the Commonwealth ministerial action group held in London on 23 April to the Library of the House. The group welcomed the transition to an elected civilian government in Sierra Leone in March. It appealed to the international community to assist the Gambia to complete its transition programme to civilian democratic rule. On Nigeria, the group regretted that the Nigerian Government had declined to pursue a dialogue with the Commonwealth since its first meeting and that the human rights situation had continued to deteriorate. Pending further discussion with the Nigerian Government over the next month, the group recommended to Commonwealth member Governments the adoption of a number of measures in order to register continuing disapproval of developments in Nigeria and agreed to consult the European Union, the United States and other members of the international community on possible other additional economic measures.

Government Communications Headquarters

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what services are currently being considered for outsourcing in GCHQ. [28531]

Mr. Rifkind: On 10 April 1996 the director of GCHQ announced that GCHQ's logistics and engineering support services would, from later this year, be contracted out to Vosper-Manteck. There are no current plans for further outsourcing.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the implications for national security of outsourcing at GCHQ; and if he will make a statement. [28532]

Mr. Rifkind: The need to continue to protect the security of GCHQ's sensitive work remains of paramount importance. The arrangements for the outsourcing of GCHQ's logistics and engineering support services will preserve its ability to meet that need. As with all commercial contractors whose service GCHQ employs, the staff of the new contractor will be subject to the same stringent level of security checking as GCHQ's own staff.

Israel-Lebanon Peace Settlement

Miss Emma Nicholson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps Her Majesty's Government have taken to ensure that European Union countries play a part in the negotiation and implementation of a lasting peace settlement between Israel and Lebanon. [28561]

Mr. Hanley: We and our EU partners are making a significant contribution to the efforts to achieve a lasting peace in the region. The EU provides economic assistance to Lebanon and is involved in the political process. For instance, it will participate in the consultative group on reconstruction in Lebanon.

Correspondence

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply to his letter to the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Richmond and Barnes (Mr. Hanley) of 2 April—Foreign Office reference: GV100/31101—about his constituent. [28546]

Mr. Hanley: Replies were sent on 3 and 7 May.

Armed Conflict

Mr. Alan Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what proposals he intends to put forward at the Council of Foreign Ministers on 13 May to make the European Union more effective in preventing armed conflict *(a)* between and *(b)* within states. [28451]

Mr. David Davis: I shall not be putting forward any proposals about the EU's role in conflict prevention at the 13 May Foreign Affairs Council. The EU's role in conflict prevention in Africa was considered at the 25 March Foreign Affairs Council. Officials are currently examining detailed proposals. The UK plays a leading role in conflict prevention—through national action, through the EU's common foreign and security policy, and through other international organisations, in particular the UN.

Cyprus

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last visited Cyprus. [28411]

Mr. David Davis: The last visit by a Foreign Secretary to Cyprus was in October 1993 for the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in October 1993.

Mr. Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what advice his Department issues to hon. Members proposing to visit Cyprus. [28414]

Mr. Davis: We welcome the many visits hon. Members make to Cyprus. We encourage them to have contact, where possible, with both Cypriot communities. We advise hon. Members to give us good advance notice of their visits, so that we can offer appropriate assistance.

Mr. Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is Her Majesty's Government's policy towards Cyprus; and if he will make a statement. [28410]

Mr. Davis: The Government remain committed to an active and leading role in the search for settlement in Cyprus within the framework of the UN Secretary-General's mission of good offices.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Royal Fine Art Commission (Report)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage when Sir Geoffrey Chipperfield's report on the Royal Fine Art Commission will be made available to the House. [28960]

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: I have today placed in the Library copies of Sir Geoffrey Chipperfield's report and my conclusions. Sir Geoffrey has recognised the valuable work done by the Royal Fine Art Commission to improve the quality of design in the major developments which it reviews. He has considered ways in which this work might be done more effectively and has recommended closer links with the statutory planning system. We are discussing with the Department of the Environment how this may best be done and we shall jointly be consulting the local authority associations.

The report also makes various recommendations for the more efficient running of the commission and its secretariat. We have considered these and implemented them where appropriate.

The commission has a high rate of success in persuading developers to adopt suggested improvements, and it has over the years produced a series of influential seminars and publications. I am grateful for the large amount of time which the chairman and 17 commissioners give to this important work.

Broad-band Communications

Mr. Nigel Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if she will make a statement on the future use of broad-band communications networks by libraries, museums and galleries. [29162]

Mr. Sproat: The Government are determined to ensure that the latest information technology will be available to public libraries, museums and galleries to give greater access, by the general public, to information and our cultural heritage. With this in mind I held a series of meetings earlier this year with representatives of the cable industry. I am glad therefore to be able to welcome the Cable Communications Association's decision to contribute £50,000 to fund a feasibility study into the use of broad-band networks to ensure that libraries, galleries and museums are used to their full potential. The study will be managed by the Library and Information Commission, and will draw on expertise from the libraries, museums and education sectors.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Electricity Supply

Mr. Stewart: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is his policy on the supply of electricity from Scotland to customers in England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [27841]

Mr. Page: Subject to the conditions of their licences, this is a commercial matter for the parties involved.

Political Donations

Mr. Allen: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will prosecute under the Companies Acts the company whose name has been supplied to him for failure to declare political donations made by its subsidiary in the year ending April 1995. [28469]

Mr. Oppenheim: If allegations of non-compliance with statutory disclosure requirements are drawn to my Department's attention, my Department will look into them, and if there has been a failure to comply with those requirements, it will take appropriate action.

Mr. Allen: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will amend the Companies Act 1985 to require Companies House to maintain a register of companies making political donations together with the sum donated and the recipient; and if he will make that register open to public inspection. [28309]

Mr. Oppenheim: The Companies Act 1985 already requires companies to disclose, in their annual directors' reports, political donations exceeding £200.

Manufacturing Industry

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what estimate he has made of the date by which gross domestic product in manufacturing will be at least 3 per cent. higher than in 1990. [28402.]

Mr. Oppenheim: My right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will set out his latest estimate of manufacturing output in the "Summer Economic Forecast" which will be published in July.

Common Cold Unit

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when the common cold unit at Harnham, Salisbury, closed; what were the duties and aims of the unit; for what

years since 1966 it published an annual report which was available to the public; and what means it used to advertise for volunteers. [28265]

Mr. Ian Taylor: The common cold unit, which opened in 1946, closed upon the retirement of its director, Dr. D. A. J. Tyrell, in 1990.

In the earlier years, the work of the unit was directed at finding the viruses that caused colds. Late studies looked at how influenza viruses might be attenuated to produce a vaccine strain, and whether it would be possible to prevent or treat colds by giving antiviral drugs. In the last years of the unit, molecular techniques were applied to detect and analyse viruses and the response of the body to them.

As far as I have been able to ascertain, the unit did not publish any annual reports.

Up until the early 1960s, volunteers were recruited largely as a result of favourable press coverage and talks and lectures in colleges and voluntary groups, as well as through word of mouth. The publicity effort became more systematic from the late 1960s, first with the publication of leaflets for use in library and workplace noticeboards, then with advertisements in selected publications. A significant number of volunteers over the years came forward as a result of return visits.

Balance of Trade

Sir Wyn Roberts: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will publish the net balance of trade between the United Kingdom and the rest of the EU for each year since accession. [28175]

Mr. Oppenheim: The net visible trade balance between the UK and the current 15 EU members for each year since 1973 is published by the Office for National Statistics in table A3 of the "Monthly Review of External Trade Statistics", a copy of which is available in the Library of the House. It is also available on the central shared database, which can be accessed from the Library of the House.

Chemical Metrology

Mr. Day: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement about the Laboratory of the Government Chemist's work for his Department regarding chemical metrology. [28844]

Mr. Ian Taylor: In the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. Hargreaves) on 2 April 1996, *Official Report*, columns *149–50*, regarding the sale of the Laboratory of the Government Chemist, I stated that LGC will continue to meet the Department's needs as the centre of excellence in chemical metrology. To ensure this, the Department will be guaranteeing work to LGC. The principal element in this will be the major programme in supporting valid analytical measurement—VAM—one of the programmes making up the national measurement system. LGC has acted as main contractor and co-ordinator for VAM since 1988. The Department has committed itself to support this work for a further five years. LGC will also be undertaking other projects, particularly in analytical innovation, biotechnology, and consumer safety, under the DTI's innovation and technology support budget. The total of the guaranteed work to be placed at LGC is £33.5 million over five years. In addition, if the contract referred to in my answer of 2 April is not awarded to the purchaser, the guaranteed workload at LGC will be increased by £750,000 over the five-year period.

Competitiveness White Paper

Mr. Waller: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when he will publish the KPMG study on outward investment commissioned in the first competitiveness White Paper; and what were its main findings. [29129]

Mr. Nelson: The KPMG study on outwards investment was published by HMSO on Thursday 9 May. Copies are available in the Libraries of both Houses. The study's main findings were that outward investment is becoming increasingly important for UK firms of all sizes, in both services and manufacturing sectors; that the main factor influencing outward investment is the need to increase sales and develop markets; and that the effect of overseas investment on UK firms' employment levels is neutral to positive for all but a small minority of projects.

Industrial Tribunals

Mr. Waller: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement about the review of the scope for agency status for the industrial tribunals mentioned in chapter 7 of the Green Paper, "Resolving Employment Rights Disputes: Options for Reform." [29131]

Mr. John M. Taylor: The Government have decided to create a new executive agency within the Department of Trade and Industry to provide the administrative support to the industrial tribunals and the Employment Appeal Tribunal with effect from 1 April 1997. The change to agency status will not affect the tribunal judiciary, who will remain independent of the Executive.

Creating an executive agency will help the tribunals to build on the improvements they have been making over recent years and allow a stronger focus on performance. This will be important in order to deal with an increasing caseload and to improve the quality of service to tribunal users.

South West Leisure Products Ltd.

Mr. Jamieson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade, pursuant to his answer of 29 February, *Official Report*, column *676*, what checks were made at the time of the granting of regional development grant in 1989 to South West Leisure Products Ltd. *(a)* into the background of the directors and *(b)* as to whether the company had been placed in the hands of the administrative receivers; and if he will make a statement. [24712]

Mr. Oppenheim *[holding answer 16 April 1996]:* The only payments of regional development grant to the company were made in 1985 and then eight months before the appointment of administrative receivers in October 1988. Firms meeting the criteria for regional development grants would receive payment of grant automatically on the basis of providing assets or jobs in a development area relating to qualifying activities which would result in new or increased productivity, or would effect a change in the product or process. It was unusual for checks to be made

into the background of directors. In accordance with normal practice under the scheme the case file was destroyed—six years after the last action was taken.

Mr. Jamieson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade, pursuant to his answer of 29 April, *Official Report*, column *363*, what was the value of the money paid on demand from the creditors of South West Leisure Products Ltd. under the provision of the two loans guaranteed by his Department. [28297]

Mr. Oppenheim *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* The loans guaranteed under the small firms loan guarantee scheme resulted in payments of £27,179.63 and £14,278.82 being made to the lender in November 1988.

Business Links

Mrs. Roche: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will list the sums of money paid by each business link for information technology systems and licences. [28147]

Mr. Page *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* This information can be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mrs. Roche: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will list the information technology system that is used in each operating business link. [28146]

Mr. Page *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* All business links are required to have effective IT systems for office services, common client database, client management, and electronic mail. The systems used vary depending on the particular requirements of each business link and details could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

ROM-Data Corporation Ltd.

Mr. Jamieson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade, pursuant to his letters to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Devonport dated 15 February, 24 March and 2 April, if his Department is currently conducting disciplinary proceedings following the collapse of ROM-Data Corporation Ltd.; and when he expects the process to be concluded. [28269]

Mr. Oppenheim *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* An inquiry under the Department's disciplinary procedures is presently in hand. It is not possible to say when this will be completed, but it is in everybody's interest that it should be concluded as quickly as possible, consistent with the principles of fair treatment for those members of staff involved and employment law.

Meat Industry (Job Losses)

Ms Walley: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what discussions he has had with the meat manufacturing/processing industry in respect of compensation for losses related to BSE; and if he will make a statement. [24102]

Mrs. Browning: I have been asked to reply.

My right hon. Friend and I have had extensive discussions with all sectors of the meat industry about the difficulties they are currently facing.

It is not the Government's policy to offer compensation to businesses for losses associated with the BSE scare. The assistance which has been made available is intended to keep open the essential links in the beef supply chain while businesses adapt to the new circumstances.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Adventure Activity Facilities

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what resources are available to Tourism Quality Services Ltd. to enable it to carry out its functions adequately as licensing authority for persons providing facilities for adventure activities; and how many people it employs. [28097]

Mr. Robin Squire: Tourism Quality Services Ltd. will receive income from licence and inspection fees. It is expected to become self-financing on a non-profit-making basis within two to three years. There is a provision in the Activity Centres (Young Persons' Safety) Act 1995 for the Secretary of State to make grants to TQS in respect of expenses which are not met by fees. Provision has been made in the supply estimates for 1996–97 for a grant of up to £238,000 if required. TQS expects eventually to employ between 30 and 40 people to meet the expected demand for licences.

Official Hospitality

Mr. Tony Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much was spent on official hospitality by her Department and all associated agencies in the financial year 1995–96. [28571]

Mr. Robin Squire: The expected spend for 1995–96, rounded to the nearest £000, is:

DfEE: £98,000

Agencies (Teachers' Pensions Agency and Employment Service): £6,000

Higher Education

Mr. Pawsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many students there are from ethnic minority groups in higher education; and what was the figure in 1979 and 1989. [28090]

Mr. Forth: Information on the ethnicity of higher education students in 1979–80 and 1989–90 was not collected centrally. Information for 1995–96 is as follows:

Home entrants to higher education in higher education institutions in the UK 1995–96 (provisional)

Ethnic group	*Number (thousands)*
White	472.2
Black Caribbean	7.0
Black African	9.3
Black other	3.0
Indian	14.8
Pakistani	7.7

Mr. Pawsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the total number of students in higher education; and what was the figure in 1979 and 1989. [28088]

Mr. Forth: The information is given in the following table:

Total higher education students

Academic year	*Number (thousands)*
1979–80[1]	708.2
1989–90[1]	977.7
1995–96[2]	1,650.6

[1] Great Britain, excluding the Open university. [2] Provisional. United Kingdom, excluding the Open university.

Mr. Pawsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many mature students there are in higher education; and what was the number in 1979 and 1989. [28089]

Mr. Forth: The information is given in the following table:

Mature[1] students in higher education

Academic year	*Number (thousands)*
1979–80[2]	350.0
1989–90[2]	532.1
1995–96[3]	987.4

[1] Those aged 21 and over on an undergraduate course, and those aged 25 and over on a postgraduate course.
[2] Great Britain, excluding the Open university.
[3] Provisional. United Kingdom, excluding the Open university.

Mr. Pawsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many women are now in higher education; and what was the figure for 1979 and 1989. [28225]

Mr. Forth: The information is given in the following table:

Female students in higher education

Academic year	*Number (thousands)*
1979–80[1]	253.4
1989–90[1]	433.0
1995–96[2]	828.9

[1] Great Britain, excluding the Open university.
[2] Provisional. United Kingdom, excluding the Open university.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector

Mr. Kilfoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment under what criteria Her Majesty's chief inspector of schools is appraised; and what criteria determine the payment to him of a bonus. [28276]

Mr. Robin Squire: The performance of Her Majesty's chief inspector is appraised each year by the permanent secretary for education and employment. This appraisal takes account of the published job description, a copy of which is in the Library, and the priority objectives for that year agreed between the permanent secretary and HMCI at the beginning of the year. HMCI can each year receive a non-consolidated bonus in recognition of his performance against these objectives.

Grant-maintained Status (Promotion Costs)

Mr. Pope: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much her Department *(a)* spent in 1995–96 and *(b)* plans to spend in 1996–97 on promoting grant-maintained status for schools. [28211]

Mr. Robin Squire: The Department provides factual information about grant-maintained status to schools and parents to help them look at the option in a balanced and objective way.

We provide this information primarily through publications, "Going GM" conferences, GM open days, and other support. Expenditure on all these activities in 1995–96 was some £0.6 million. The budget for GM schools' information for 1996–97 allows for spending up to a maximum of £0.9 million.

Conduct of Schools (Ministerial Powers)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when she next proposes to use her powers under section 220 of the Education Act 1993. [28958]

Mrs. Gillian Shephard: I am today launching consultation on a proposal to transfer Langham school, Haringey, to the control of an education association.

After an inspection in November 1994, Her Majesty's chief inspector of schools decided that this 900-pupil secondary school in Tottenham was failing to provide and acceptable standard of education to its pupils. The school's governors and Haringey local education authority prepared an action plan for the school's recovery. However, subsequent monitoring visits by Her Majesty's inspectors have found very limited progress at the school. The most recent visit in March recorded that GCSE entries and results declined between 1994 and 1995. The expectations of teachers and the achievements of pupils remain low. The standard of teaching has not improved. Indeed, while the 1994 Ofsted report found that "the majority of the teaching is generally satisfactory", the March 1996 Ofsted report, based on a smaller but still significant sample of lessons, found that "the quality of teaching was satisfactory in less than half the lessons".

I have considered carefully the findings of Ofsted. I have also read carefully a joint response to Ofsted's findings submitted by the school's governors and Haringey LEA. In their response they point to a fall in exclusions and to improvements in behaviour but they accept the findings of Ofsted on the quality of teaching and pupils' achievements.

Having considered all the circumstances of the school, I now propose to place Langham school under the control of an education association. However, before taking a decision on this, I am inviting comments from all interested parties by 14 June 1996.

If the school is transferred to an education association, I have it in mind to place it under the control of the North East London Education Association, which was previously responsible for Hackney Downs school. I am therefore consulting the NELEA on this proposal on a contingency basis.

Although Langham school presents serious challenges, I very much hope that the action that I am proposing will result in its improvement to the point where it offers a good education to all its pupils.

PRIME MINISTER

Office Space

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the square footage and cost of office space rented by his Department and its agencies and the number of his Department's or agencies' buildings partly or fully unoccupied together with the square footage of that unoccupied office space and its estimated rental value where available in each of the past five financial years. [27731]

The Prime Minister: For these purposes my office is part of the Cabinet Office. I refer the hon. Member to the reply given today by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service.

Engagements

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 9 May. [27569]

Mr. Harry Greenway: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 9 May. [27570]

The Prime Minister: This morning I presided at a meeting of the Cabinet and had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall be having further meetings later today.

European Union Flag

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Prime Minister which Government offices displayed the European Union flag on 8 May; and if he will make a statement. [28592]

The Prime Minister: So far as I am aware, none.

DEFENCE

Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what restrictions are placed on staff at the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment in respect of testing chemical agents on themselves; when this policy was introduced; and if staff who break this policy are subject to disciplinary action. [28037]

Mr. Arbuthnot: This is a matter for the chief executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the chief executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Ken Livingstone, dated 9 May 1996:

I have been asked to reply to your question about staff at the former Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment testing substances on themselves since this falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency which includes CBD Sector in one of its divisions.

Staff in what is now called the Protection and Life Sciences Division, Porton Down are not permitted to test chemical agents on themselves. This has been a long standing policy of the establishment at Porton Down but we have been unable to find a date on which this policy was formally introduced. We are aware that some experiments were conducted involving staff and the incapacitating drug LSD in the early 1960s but we are unaware of any other formal studies since that time having been undertaken involving members of staff. If any member of staff was found to have deviated from the policy on self testing they would be subject to the same disciplinary action expected for any other infringement of workplace regulations.

I hope this information is helpful.

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the three-year review of the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment as an agency of his Department finished. [28041]

Mr. Arbuthnot: This is a matter for the chief executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the chief executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Ken Livingstone, dated 9 May 1996:

I have been asked to reply to your question about the three year review of the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment as Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency which now includes the former CBDE in one of its divisions.

The three year review of the Chemical and Biological Defence Agency consisted of three elements: the evaluation of performance, reconsideration of Prior Options, and revision of the Framework Document. The evaluation of performance was carried out by Coopers and Lybrand in 1993 and their report was received in early 1994. The second phase involving reconsideration of the Prior Options coincided with the Defence Cost Studies being carried out by the Ministry of Defence as part of the Front Line First review. The Defence Cost Studies exercise recommended that CBDE should become an element of a new science and technology agency which became known as the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency and was launched as a trading fund on 1 April 1995. The move into the DERA therefore superseded the Prior Options reconsideration and the revision of the Framework Document.

I hope this information is helpful.

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if service personnel who take part in the service volunteers programme at the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment are subject to *(a)* positive and *(b)* negative vetting; [28035]

(2) if service personnel who take part in the service volunteers programme at the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment are required to sign the Official Secrets Act 1911 during their stay. [28034]

Mr. Arbuthnot: This is a matter for the chief executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the chief executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Ken Livingstone, dated 9 May 1996:

I have been asked to reply to your questions about whether service volunteers attending the former Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment, Porton Down are security vetted and sign the Official Secrets Act. This falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency and I am answering both questions in this reply.

All those who take part in the volunteer programme at what is now known as the Protection and Life Sciences Division, Porton Down are serving members of the Armed Forces and as such will have signed the Official Secrets Act. The volunteers are not required to sign the Official Secrets Act again during their stay at Porton Down

Since 1990 service personnel have had routine security clearances conducted as part of the recruitment process. No further levels of security clearances are required in order to take part in the studies conducted at Porton Down.

I hope this information is helpful.

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what details of experiments, when requested, are given to relatives of service personnel who took part in the service volunteers programme at the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment in cases where the service personnel are no longer living. [28043]

Mr. Arbuthnot: This is a matter for the chief executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the chief executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Ken Livingstone, dated 9 May 1996:

I have been asked to reply to your question about providing information to relatives of volunteers at the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment Porton Down since the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency now includes CBD Sector in one of its divisions.

To date we have not received any enquiries from the relatives of deceased former volunteers. If we were to be approached by the close relatives of a former volunteer we would provide them with the same information we would have given the volunteer himself regarding their parent, child or spouse's experiences at Porton Down.

I hope this information is helpful.

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for which civilian organisations the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment has carried out work since 1966; and if it has been the objective of the establishment to increase its work for civilian bodies since 1966. [28042]

Mr. Arbuthnot: This is a matter for the chief executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the chief executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Ken Livingstone, dated 9 May 1996:

I have been asked to reply to your question about work done for civilian organisations by the Chemical and Biological Defence Sector (CBD) of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA).

In common with the rest of DERA, CBD undertakes work for other government departments and the commercial sector. It does this primarily to maintain its scientific capability against a background of continuing budgetary pressures on the MOD. Without such work the scientific support essential for the defence of the realm in the face of an increasingly complex spectrum of chemical and biological threats would be compromised.

A secondary motivation for CBD's involvement in non-MOD work is to facilitate technology transfer in line with UK Government policy. This aims to maximise the benefit of MOD expenditure on defence research through its application in other areas. Working with the civil sector on a commercial basis allows the MOD's technology to be valued as an investment and properly exploited to the good of the UK economy.

I regret it would involve disproportionate costs to try and identify all the civilian organisations for which the establishment at Porton Down has conducted research since 1966.

I hope this information is helpful.

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are the responsibilities and objectives of the medical division of the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment; when this division was set up; who have been the superintendents or heads of this division since 1966; and in which years they were superintendent or head of this division. [28036]

Mr. Arbuthnot: This is a matter for the chief executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the chief executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Ken Livingstone, dated 9 May 1996:

I have been asked to reply to your question about the medical division of the former Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment at Porton Down which is now part of the Chemical and Biological Defence Sector of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA).

As part of the organisational changes which occurred when the former CBDE joined DERA the medical division was amalgamated with the former biology and microbiology divisions to form the Medical Countermeasures business centre. This department has the responsibility of carrying out research to increase the body's capability to withstand attack from chemical or biological warfare agents and to provide treatments should personnel be exposed to such materials. The research interests include biochemistry and toxicology, drug evaluation, vaccine research, physiology and human factors, and surgical and materials specialisations.

The Medical division was first formally identified by that title in 1954 and had its roots in the physiology section which had existed at Porton Down since World War 1. Since 1966 it has had 5 superintendents who have held the posts for varying periods of time from one to thirteen years. Apart from acknowledging the head of the establishment I regret it is not our practice to name individuals who hold specific posts within the organisation.

I hope this information is helpful.

Defence Research Information Centre

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are the responsibilities of the defence research information centre; what are the titles of the publications or bulletins which are published by the defence research information centre *(a)* regularly and *(b)* occasionally; and what is the function and nature of each of these publications or bulletins. [28044]

Mr. Arbuthnot: This is a matter for the chief executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the chief executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Ken Livingstone, dated 9 May 1996:

I have been asked to reply to your question about the Defence Research Information Centre which is now part of the Defence Support Services division of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency of which I am Chief Executive.

The role of the Defence Research Information Centre, DRIC, based in Glasgow, is to act as a repository and source of information for all technical and scientific reports produced by or sponsored by the Ministry of Defence and its agencies. Some information is also held under international exchange agreements. Approved customers are entitled to draw on this information.

DRIC produces a number of bulletins for customers listing the information that is held. These and their functions are summarised in the table below.

Item	*Title*	*Frequency*	*Nature (content)*	*Function*
A	DRIC Abstracts	Monthly and Quarterly	Citations to classified reports of a scientific or technical nature which have been received from UK or overseas sources	Dissemination within, or on behalf of MoD, of classified results of MoD
B	DRIC Standard Profiles	Monthly	Subject specific subset of DRIC Abstracts	Selected subject categories of above
C	Overseas Citations Lists	Monthly	Lists of bibliographic details of overseas defence research publications	Similar to item A but based solely on citation lists received from overseas. Raises awareness of their defence research activities
D	DRIC Newsletter	Quarterly	Customer information	Keeping customers aware of relevant development in DRIC's capabilities and indicating how they can obtain maximum benefit

I hope this information helps.

HMS Dasher

Mr. Wilson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will arrange for all papers relating to the loss of HMS Dasher on 27 March 1943 on the River Clyde, including the findings resulting from subsequent dives by the wrecks section of the Hydrographic Office, to be made available to interested parties. [28169]

Mr. Soames: HMS Dasher, an escort carrier based on a mercantile hull and built in the USA, blew up and sank on 27 March 1943, due to an explosion in her aviation fuel system. All papers relating to her loss have been available at the Public Record Office since 1972. A deep dive on this wreck was conducted in January 1982, on behalf of the Royal Navy Hydrographic Office. The purpose of the dive was positively to identify Dasher, which is lying close to another wreck, and to obtain an accurate fix of her position for charting purposes. The information now appears on Admiralty chart No. 2491.

Mr. Wilson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will bring forward proposals for official recognition by the Royal Navy of the loss of HMS Dasher and the loss of human life. [28170]

Mr. Soames: The names of all those who died as a result of the loss of HMS Dasher, and whose bodies were not recovered, are commemorated on various official war memorials. The graves of those whose bodies were recovered are the responsibility either of their families or, if the bodies were not claimed at the time, of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. In line with the general practice, my Deaprtment has no plans for further recognition of the loss of HMS Dasher.

War Crime Sites

Mr. Macdonald: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the role of British troops deployed with the United Nations implementation force—IFOR—in respect of their role in protecting suspected war crime sites at the request of the international tribunal of The Hague. [28273]

Mr. Soames: IFOR's primary mission in Bosnia is to ensure compliance with the military aspects of the peace agreement. It does not have the resources to guard suspected mass grave sites on a continuous basis without detriment to this mission. IFOR provides, however, a secure environment for the tribunal's work and logistic support and protection for its investigators on a case-by-case basis. In addition, IFOR conducts aerial reconnaissance and patrols in the area of suspected mass grave sites to monitor and report on any tampering or suspicious activity.

The United Kingdom fully supports the work of the tribunal and British troops are closely involved in assisting their investigations. The tribunal's chief prosecutor has expressed full satisfaction with the level of support provided by IFOR.

Defence Analytical Services Agency

Mr. Butler: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what performance targets have been set for the Defence Analytical Services Agency for 1996–97. [28961]

Mr. Soames: Key targets have been set for the chief executive of the Defence Analytical Services Agency for financial year 1996–97. The targets build on the progress already made by the agency since it formed in July 1992 and are as follows:

Delivery of customer service and quality

About three quarters of the agency's business is covered by service level agreements with customers, which set out the targets and standards for the level of service, timeliness and quality of work. For the remaining parts of the business, for which service level agreements are not appropriate, project agreements are in place. Key targets are:

(a) To meet at least 95 per cent. of the timeliness and quality targets set in the service level agreements and project agreements.

(b) To have at least 90 per cent. of customers saying they are at least satisfied with the timeliness, quality of work and helpfulness of staff in the annual customer satisfaction survey covering all aspects of the business.

(c) To engage customers in a fundamental review of service level agreements to ensure they fully reflect current and expected needs.

(d) To demonstrate a further, independently assessed, improvement in the quality of published output.

Efficiency and use of resources

The agency plans to make significant savings in 1996–97 as well as meeting the demands arising from a number of important studies and initiatives. Key targets are:

(e) To bring forward £136,000 "Competing for Quality" savings scheduled for 1997–98 to 1996–97.

(f) To support the MOD's work on the Gulf health research programme, implementation of the Bett study, and civilian pay and grading from within existing resources.

Official Hospitality

Mr. Tony Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much was spent on official hospitality by his Department and all associated agencies in the financial year 1995–96. [28568]

Mr. Soames: During financial year 1995–96 my Department spent £5.105 million on official hospitality. These figures include expenditure incurred by the Ministry of Defence itself, by formations and establishments of the armed forces at home and abroad, and by individual officers occupying command and international appointments for which entertainment allowances are payable. Where responsibility for such expenditure falls to the chief executives of my Department's agencies I have asked the chief executives to reply direct to the hon. Member.

Letter from J. R. Drew to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 9 May 1996:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about how much was spent on official hospitality in his Department and associated agencies in 1995/96 as this matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Army Base Repair Organisation (ABRO).

During the financial year 1995/96 ABRO spent £5,886 on official hospitality.

Letter from K. J. W. Goad to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 9 May 1996:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence regarding official hospitality by his Department and all associated agencies in the financial year 1995–96. As Chief Executive of the Army Base Storage and Distribution Agency (ABSDA), I reply with the Agency's details.

The total spend on official hospitality for my Agency as a whole (i.e. across all 10 main Depot locations and 24 smaller locations in Great Britain and Germany) in the financial year 1995/96 was £16,389.77.

Thank you very much for your enquiry. I hope this is sufficient detail to meet your requirements. Should you require any further information please contact me.

Letter from Paul Altobell to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 9 May 1996:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about official hospitality as this matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Defence Analytical Services Agency (DASA).

DASA spent £769.24 on official hospitality in financial year 1995/96.

Letter from A. H. Roache to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 9 May 1996:

As Chief Executive of the Defence Animal Centre (DAC) I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence regarding how much was spent on official hospitality by his Department and all associated agencies in the financial year 1995/96.

The DAC did not expend Agency funds on official hospitality in the period indicated.

Letter from Michael Roycroft to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 9 May 1996:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about expenditure on official entertainment, as this matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Defence Clothing & Textile Agency.

Expenditure on official entertainment for the financial year 1995/96 was £2943.

I hope this information answers your question, if I can be of further assistance to you please do not hesitate to contact me.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 9 May 1996:

The Secretary of State for Defence has asked me to reply on behalf of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) to your question about expenditure on official hospitality in 1995/96.

In the financial year 1995/96 DERA spent a total of £47787 on official hospitality.

I hope this information is helpful.

Letter from T. McG. Browne to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 8 May 1996:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Defence, the Rt Hon Michael Portillo MP, regarding the cost of official hospitality within the MoD and all associated agencies during financial year 1995/96.

This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Defence Postal & Courier Services Agency. The official hospitality expenditure by my agency during 1995/96 was £2,100. This figure is provisional and, subject to audit, will be included in my Agency's Annual Report which will be laid before Parliament later this summer.

I hope this information is helpful.

Letter from M. G. R. Hodson to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 9 May 1996:

I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence, about official hospitality, as this matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Defence Transport and Movements Executive Agency.

In the last financial year, the cost of hospitality, which is included in the running cost budget for my agency, was £2,120. This was somewhat higher than usual because I was honoured to host both the Chief Executives' and Agency Administrators' Conferences during 1995.

Letter from Keith Ellender to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 9 May 1996:

I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence about how much was spent on official hospitality in the financial year 1995–96, as this matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Disposal Sales Agency.

The amount spent by my Agency on official hospitality in the financial year 1995–96 was £5,502

Letter from W. E. Spreadbury to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 9 May 1996:

In the absence on duty of the Chief Executive, I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence concerning expenditure on official hospitality.

This Agency spent £3207 on official hospitality in the financial year 1995–96.

Letter from M. R. Pack to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 9 May 1996:

1. You recently asked the Secretary of State for Defence a Parliamentary Question relating to the costs incurred by the Department and associated agencies in providing official hospitality during the financial year 1995–96. As your question relates, in part, to the Hydrographic Office it has been referred to us for a reply.

2. In the normal course of events my Chief Executive, Rear Admiral Clarke would have replied to you personally but I am afraid he is presently absent from the Office on official duty so I have been asked to reply to you on his behalf.

3. During the financial year 1995–96 a total of £22,387 was expended by the Hydrographic Office on official entertainment.

4. I hope this information has been helpful.

Letter from A. W. Pollard to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 9 May 1996:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the expenditure on official hospitality by executive agencies. As Chief Executive, this falls within my area of responsibility for the Logistic Information Systems Agency (LISA).

This agency has incurred no expenses in regard to hospitality.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Letter from J. C. R. Hunt to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 9 May 1996:

As Chief Executive of the Meteorological Office I am replying to your recent question which asked how much was spent on official hospitality in the financial year 1995–96.

The hospitality expenditure in 1995–96 was £24,524. It was spent in the course of winning some £20M worth of commercial business and maintaining in international fora the standing of the Office as a world class science-based organisation.

Letter from M. J. Sands to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 9 May 1996:

I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence about expenditure on official hospitality as this matter falls within the area of responsibility of the Chief Executive as far as the Military Survey Defence Agency is concerned. I regret that the Chief Executive is not available to reply personally due to absence on duty.

The sum spent on official hospitality in this Agency in Financial Year 1995–96 was £6,354. This expenditure was primarily in support of the maintenance and extension of highly cost-effective arrangements for the international exchange of geographic material.

Letter form W. S. Graham to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 9 May 1996:

1. I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence, that asked how much was spent on official hospitality by the 'Naval Aircraft Repair Organisation (NARO)' in the financial year 1995–96 as the matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the NARO.

2. The sum of £1,299 (One Thousand Two Hundred and Ninety Nine Pounds) was spent on official hospitality in financial year 1995–96.

Letter from I. P. Somervaille to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 9 May 1996:

The Secretary of State for Defence has asked the Chief Executive of the Naval Recruiting and Training Agency (NRTA) to reply to your Parliamentary Question about the expenditure on official hospitality in the NRTA in the financial year 1995–96. I am replying on behalf of the Chief Executive.

The total expenditure on official hospitality in the NRTA in the financial year 1995–96 is £67,731.45.

Letter from Brian Raine to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 8 May 1996:

I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence on how much was spent on official hospitality by his Department and all associated agencies in the financial year 1995–96.

Queen Victoria School total for 1995–96 was £4,766.82.

If you have any further questions about this please do not hesitate to contact me.

Letter from P. C. Ayee to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 9 May 1996:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about how much was spent on official hospitality by his department and all associated agencies in the financial year 1995–96, as this matter falls within my responsibility as Chief Executive of the Royal Air Force Signals Engineering Establishment.

In 1995–96 the cost of hospitality, which is included in the running cost budget for my agency, was £975.

Letter from A. A. Nicholson to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 9 May 1996:

I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence about expenditure on official hospitality insofar as this bears on my responsibilities for the Royal Air Force Training Group Defence Agency.

In the financial year 1995/96, the Training Group Defence Agency spent £1964 from its budget on official hospitality. Details of Hospitality Grants made from central funds direct in individual units are not included, but will be incorporated in the figures to be provided for the Department.

I am sending a copy of this letter to the Agency's owner, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief Personnel and Training Command.

Letter from T. S. Mitchelson to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 9 May 1996:

1. I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of Defence about official hospitality as this matter falls within my area of responsibility as the Chief Executive of the Service Children's Education Agency. The information that I supply below for Financial Year 1995/96 relates to the Service Children's Schools (North West Europe) Agency which was subsumed by SCE on 1 April 1996.

2. During 1995/96 £296.58 was spent on official hospitality.

Letter from S. B. J. Wilks to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 9 May 1996:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the provision of hospitality in the financial year 1995/96, in the absence of the Chief Executive Army Technical Support Agency (ATSA), as this matter falls within his area of responsibility.

ATSA launched in October 1995 but formed as a Directorate on 1 April 1995. During 1995/96 £11,300 was spent on official hospitality.

Letter from M. A. Rowe to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 9 May 1996:

I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence about spending on official hospitality where it relates to my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Pay Personnel Agency. I am also replying on behalf of the Defence Accounts Agency which ceased to exist on 1 February 1996, following the creation of the Defence Bills Agency on 1 January 1996 and the return of the Directorate of Financial Management Accounting Services to MOD HQ on 1 December 1995.

The figures you sought, for the two Agencies, are as follows:

Defence Accounts Agency: £608

Pay and Personnel Agency: £137

Letter from T. R. Thurgate to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 9 May 1996:

I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence about expenditure on official hospitality during the financial year 1995–96 as this matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of Defence Bills Agency. I can confirm that for the three months from the launch of the Defence Bills Agency on 1 January 1996 until the end of the financial year the total expenditure on hospitality was £46.00.

I trust that this reply meets your requirements.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Lone Parents

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate his Department has made of the percentage of lone parents in *(a)* 1984 and *(b)* 1995 who are (i) divorced and (ii) widowed; and if he will make a statement. [27896]

Mr. Andrew Mitchell: The latest available estimates are for 1994–95.

The estimates are:

Percentage

	1984	*1994–95*
Divorced/separated	68	58
Widowed	12	5
Single never married	20	37

Note:
The estimates are based on sample survey data.
Source:
Department of Social Security data.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Spellar: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what are the reasons for *(a)* disregarding disability living allowance for assessment purposes under the Child Support Acts and *(b)* taking it into account in the severe disability allowance. [28033]

Mr. Andrew Mitchell: Disability living allowance is paid in recognition of the additional needs of a disabled person. It is disregarded in the assessment of child support maintenance liability since it would be inappropriate to treat it as income available for that purpose.

For this reason the allowance is disregarded in calculating entitlement to severe disablement allowance and the severe disability premium in income support. Severe disability allowance does not exist.

Reduced Earnings Allowance

Ms Lynne: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the cost to the Benefits Agency of carrying out a trawl of its industrial injuries benefit cases to identify the retirement allowance and reduced earnings claimants who have attained pension age since April 1989 before the introduction of the changes to the reduced earnings allowance on 24 March. [28029]

Mr. Roger Evans: The administration of industrial injuries benefit is a matter for Peter Mathison, the chief executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Ms Liz Lynne, dated 8 May 1996:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent parliamentary Question asking what was the cost to the Benefits Agency (BA) of carrying out a trawl of their Industrial Injuries Benefit cases to identify the Retirement Allowance and Reduced Earnings claimants who have attainted pension age since April 1989 before the introduction of the changes to the Reduced Earnings Allowance on 24th March.

£2,287,000 was allocated to BA Districts for this identification exercise. This figure is provisional and may be subject to change.

I hope this reply is helpful.

Motability

Mr. Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what access Motability has to the funds of Motability Finance Ltd; [27540]

(2) who is responsible for the financial reserves of Motability Finance Ltd. [27232]

Mr. Burt: Financial reserves are maintained by Motability Finance Ltd. as a normal business measure to safeguard the operation of its lease and hire purchase schemes. Those reserves are legally owned by MFL. Reserves held in excess of requirements have been transferred by way of gift into the Motability 10th Anniversary trust, which provides charitable support to the Motability scheme.

Child Support Agency

Ms Lynne: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the percentage of Child Support Agency assessments cleared *(a)* within 13 weeks, *(b)* within 26 weeks and *(c)* in more than 26 weeks in each month since the Child Support Agency started to operate. [28055]

Mr. Andrew Mitchell: The information requested could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Social Fund

Mr. Denham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the average value of *(a)* social fund loans and *(b)* social fund grants to pensioners in the most recent year for which figures are available. [28339]

Mr. Roger Evans: The information is set out below.

AVERAGE VALUE OF SOCIAL FUND DISCRETIONARY AWARDS TO PENSIONERS: 1995–96

Community care grants: £264.82

Budgeting loans: £236.40

Crisis loans: £66.45

Note:
The definition of the pensioner client group includes applicant or partner aged:

60 or over with income support—IS—pensioner premium

80 or over with IS higher pensioner premium

60 to 70, disabled with IS higher pensioner premium.

Mr. Denham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the expenditure on *(a)* social fund grants and *(b)* social fund loans to pensioners in the most recent year for which figures are available. [28338]

Mr. Evans: The information is set out in the table.

Social fund grants and loans pensioner expenditure: 1995–96

Community care grants: £13.5 million

Budgeting loans: £6.5 million

Crisis loans: £0.4 million

Note:
The definition of the Pensioner client group includes applicant or partner aged:
60 or over with income support—IS—pensioner premium
80 or over with IS higher pensioner premium
60 to 70, disabled with IS higher pensioner premium.

Mr. Denham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the average pay back period for social fund loans to pensioners; and what is the average weekly deduction from benefit. [28340]

Mr. Evans: The average pay back period for social fund loans to pensioners is not immediately available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

The repayment terms for social fund loans are designed to be affordable to the applicant. The rate of repayment depends upon the applicant's individual circumstances. Although most loans are repaid within 78 weeks, the period of repayment may be extended up to 104 weeks.

The average weekly deduction from pensioners' benefit is £6.25. This figure is calculated from statistics published in the income support statistics quarterly inquiry, May 1995 and is the latest information available.

Mr. Denham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners currently have more than one social fund loan; what is the current average value of *(a)* the loans outstanding and *(b)* the original sum borrowed. [28341]

Mr. Evans: The information requested could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Official Hospitality

Mr. Tony Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much was spent on official hospitality by his Department and all associated agencies in the financial year 1995–96. [28566]

Mr. Burt: Expenditure information for the 1995–96 financial year has not yet been finalised but provisional figures indicate the total amount spent in that year on official hospitality by the Department of Social Security and all associated agencies was £105,541.

Mortgage Interest Direct

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if adjudicating officers are implementing the R *v.* Secretary of State ex parte Golding judgment. [26510]

Mr. Roger Evans *[holding answer 24 April 1996]:* The Department has taken further advice regarding the implications of the judgment. Contrary to what we thought at the time of the judgment we now understand that, pending the Department's appeal against the decision, paragraph 11 of schedule 9A to the claims and payments regulations is not an appropriate vehicle for recovering overpayments of mortgage interest direct directly from lenders where the overpayment occurred prior to the new adjudication decision. The Benefits Agency has instructed local offices accordingly.

Severe Hardship Payments

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many young people are claiming severe hardship payments currently *(a)* nationally, *(b)* in London, *(c)* in Waltham Forest, *(d)* in Redbridge and *(e)* in Leyton. [24137]

Mr. Roger Evans *[Pursuant to his reply 3 April, Official Report, column 419]:* Peter Mathison, the chief executive of the Benefits Agency is writing again to clarify his reply of 3 April 1996.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Harry Cohen, dated 8 May 1996:

You recently asked the Secretary of State for Social Security what are the number of young people claiming severe hardship payments currently (a) nationally, (b) in London, (c) in Waltham Forest, (d) in Redbridge and (e) in Leyton. I am writing to clarify the information provided in my letter of 3 April 1996.

I regret that the figure I quoted for the number of young people claiming severe hardship in the BA Districts which include the London postal area was incorrect. The figure should have been 617. This figure is provisional and subject to change.

I apologise for any inconvenience this may have caused you.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Cultural Traditions Conferences

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the cost of the cultural traditions group's *(a)* varieties of Irishness conference, *(b)* varieties of Britishness conference and *(c)* varieties of Scottishness conference. [27887]

Mr. Ancram: The costs incurred by the cultural traditions group in organising each conference were:

(a) Varieties of Irishness, March 1989, Portrush—£10,998, with an additional contribution from the American Ireland Fund;

(b) Varieties of Britishness, March 1990, Enniskillen—£15,280, with an additional contribution from the American Ireland Fund;

(c) Varieties of Scottishness, March 1996, Belfast—£7,966, with an additional contribution to travel costs from a private sector sponsor.

Mr. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the budget allocated for the cultural traditions group's cultural diversity in contemporary Europe conference. [27888]

Mr. Ancram: The cultural traditions group's conference on cultural diversity in contemporary Europe, originally planned for 23–24 June 1996, has been postponed and will not now take place during the current financial year.

Mr. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment he has made of the cultural balance in the choice of speakers for the cultural diversity in contemporary Europe conference; and if he will make a statement. [27890]

Mr. Ancram: The cultural traditions group's proposed conference on cultural diversity in contemporary Europe has been postponed. The organisers will choose speakers for a re-arranged conference at a later stage.

Orange and GAA Halls

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if Orange and Gaelic Athletic Association halls will receive equality of treatment with regard to funding by Government agencies. [27889]

Mr. Ancram: Every application for funding will be treated on its merits and in accordance with the criteria which apply in the relevant schemes regardless of the source of the application.

Irish Language

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary *(a)* have a knowledge of the Irish language and *(b)* are studying the Irish language. [28047]

Sir John Wheeler: The information is as follows:

(a) Classified as linguists: five

Ordinary educational qualifications: 64

Irish language familiarisation:132

(b) Currently studying: 27

Police (Sporting Ventures)

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the joint sporting ventures between the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the individual constabularies of Scotland in the past year. [28308]

Sir John Wheeler: The following list includes also events in which the RUC participated and which were staged in Scotland.

Angling

Police Athletic Association fly fishing championships, Loch Leven, Edinburgh, 19 September 1995

Boating/sailing

Police Athletic Association shore sailing championship, the Clyde, 2 June 1995

Badminton

Police Athletic Association championships at Aberdeen, 19 April 1996

Clay pigeon

RUC -v.- Strathclyde police at Strathclyde, 5 July 1995

Football (soccer)

RUC -v.- Strathclyde police at Belfast, 21 February 1996

Golf

Dumfries and Galloway police -v.- RUC at Portpatrick, 5 July 1995

Rugby

Lothian and Borders police seven-a-side tournament in Edinburgh, 24 April 1996

Shooting

Scottish practical pistol championships at Galashiels, 30 June 1995

Police Athletic Association long-range rifle championships at Lauder, 28 June 1995

Graded practical pistol match at Galashiels, 8 March 1996

Sea angling

Police Athletic Association championships at Portpatrick, 22 August 1995

Skiing

Police Athletic Association championships at Aviemore, 19 March 1996

Swimming

Police Athletic Association championships at Edinburgh, 23 April 1996

Official Hospitality

Mr. Tony Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much was spent on official hospitality by his Department and all associated agencies in the financial year 1995–96. [28567]

Sir John Wheeler: The Northern Ireland Office, Northern Ireland Departments and their agencies spent £679,512 on official hospitality in 1995–96.

Deaf-blind People

Mr. Alfred Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many deaf-blind people were resident in the area of each local authority at the latest date for which figures are available; how many local authorities do not currently offer basic rehabilitation and social work support services for deaf-blind people; what action he is taking to improve local provision for them; and if he will make a statement. [27143]

Mr. Moss *[holding answer 8 May 1996]:* In Northern Ireland responsibility for rehabilitation and social work services lies with the health and social services boards and trusts. The number of deaf-blind people known to each board is as follows:

Eastern: 189

Northern: 25

Southern: 127

Western: 129

A key objective of the regional strategy for Northern Ireland health and personal social services 1992 to 1997 was that each board should ascertain the number and needs of sensorily impaired people in its population and ensure access to specialist teams of staff to provide support for people with a hearing and/or visual impairment. Boards have identified services for sensorily impaired people as a priority in their purchasing plans in accordance with their regional strategy and rehabilitation and social work services are provided for deaf-blind people within each board area.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Office Space

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will list the square footage and cost of office space rented by his Department and its agencies and the number of his Department's or agencies' buildings partly, or fully unoccupied together with the square footage of that unoccupied office space and its estimated rental value where available in each of the past five financial years. [27723]

Mr. Willetts: The Cabinet Office and its agencies occupy both freehold and leasehold property. The information requested on leasehold properties is available only from 1993–94 and is as follows:

Cabinet Office including Office of Public Service

	Square footage of rented accommodation	*Cost (£)*	*Number of partly, or wholly vacant buildings*	*Square footage*	*Cost*
1993–94	34,498	222,740	Nil	—	—
1994–95	30,804	398,429	Nil	—	—
1995–96	49,542	595,588	Nil	—	—

OPS agencies excluding Property Advisers to the Civil Estate

	Square footage of rented accommodation	*Cost (£)*	*Number of partly, or wholly vacant buildings*	*Square footage*	*Cost*
1993–94	207,600	3,765,759	nil	—	—
April–August 1994[1]	203,804	3,009,325	nil		
September 1994–March 1995	183,031	3,009,325	nil	—	—
1995–96	182,733	2,174,325	nil	—	—

[1] The Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency relocated to Norwich in September 1994 and gave up space as a result of the move.

Property Advisers to the Civil Estate

PACE came into existence on 1 April 1996. Property Holdings, the predecessor to PACE, was responsible for the Government civil office estate. The cost of occupied space was recharged to occupying Departments with the cost of vacant space falling to Property Holdings. The cost of vacant space on the civil estate, both leasehold and freehold, which cannot be split, is as follows:

	Costs of vacant buildings on the Civil Estate (£)	*Square footage of vacant space at end of year*	*Vacant space as a percentage of the Civil Estate*
1993–94	86,500,000	8,180,000	10.1
1994–95	90,900,000	10,086,000	12.5
1995–96	133,600,000	10,947,000	13.6

Property Holdings also had its own accommodation, a headquarters building and seven regional offices. The information in respect of Property Holdings own accommodation is as follows:

	Square footage of rented accommodation	*Cost (£)*	*Number of partly, or wholly vacant buildings*	*Square footage*	*Cost*
1993–94	97,240	2,455,000	Nil	—	—
1994–95	88,200	2,261,000	Nil	—	—
1995–96	88,510	2,066,000	Nil	—	—
Her Majesty's Stationery Office					
1993–94	168,983	512,239	2	16,838	39,906
1994–95	168,983	508,202	2	28,520	49,196
1995–96	170,631	478,733	1	42,867	72,144
Central Office of Information					
1993–94	204,481	1,532,461	1	4,094	66,527
1994–95	148,938	2,024,971	1	10,700	173,875
1995–96	148,938	2,050,065	1	15,363	249,649

WALES

Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many *(a)* deputations and *(b)* representations he has received concerning BSE; and if he will make a statement. [28067]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The Welsh Office has received numerous representations about BSE and we have met many individuals and organisations on this subject.

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what further steps he will take to tackle BSE in Wales. [28404]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The Government are considering the possibility of selective culling to accelerate the decline in the number of BSE cases occurring in the future. Any such cull would have to lead to a genuine reduction in the future incidence of BSE if it was to be worth doing. The aim would be to target cattle most at risk of developing

BSE. A final decision on whether to take this approach will be made in the context of negotiations on lifting the current European Union ban on the export of British beef.

South-East Wales Ambulance Trust

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what consultation he has had with the chairman of the South-East Wales ambulance trust about management redundancies; what provision will be made in the accounts for the year 1996–97 for the costs of the redundancies; and what assessment he has made of that impact on the delivery of services. [28081]

Mr. Hague: None; these are operational matters for the board of the trust. My officials will be discussing with the trust its plans for 1996–97 on receipt of its annual operational plan by the end of May 1996.

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what consultation he has had with the chairman of the South-East Wales ambulance trust concerning plans to reduce the number of ambulance stations in *(a)* Powys, *(b)* Gwent and *(c)* South Glamorgan. [28082]

Mr. Hague: None.

Local Government Reorganisation

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he plans to meet the leaders of each of the unitary councils in Wales to discuss the consequences of his local government reorganisation; and if he will make a statement. [28065]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: My right hon. Friend and I have no plans to meet leaders of the unitary councils in Wales to discuss the consequences of local government reorganisation.

Therapists

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list for each health board area in Wales the number of fully-trained specialists in the NHS in *(a)* speech and language therapy, *(b)* physiotherapy and *(c)* chiropody for (i) 1990 and (ii) 1995; and if he will make a statement. [27895]

Mr. Richards: The information is given in the following table. Reliable data are not available for 1990 so 1991 data have been given. Staff employed by NHS trusts are shown in the health authority area in which the trust is situated.

Staff in post (whole-time equivalent numbers) at 30 September

Old health authority area	*Speech and language therapists*		*Physiotherapists*		*Chiropodists*	
	1991	*1995*	*1991*	*1995*	*1991*	*1995*
Clwyd[1]	27	35	94	93	19	17
East Dyfed	14	16	44	49	18	17
Gwent	21	23	85	111	23	27
Gwynedd	11	16	54	65	14	15
Mid Glamorgan	22	37	86	87	37	40
Pembrokeshire	5	[3]—	21	[3]—	8	[3]—
Powys[1]	8	9	30	30	13	16
South Glamorgan[1]	31	30	155	142	31	27
West Glamorgan	14	30	81	87	33	36
WHCSA[2]	—	—	—	2	—	—

[1] The 1995 data may exclude a small number of staff paid on local pay scales for whom no details of occupation are available centrally.
[2] Welsh Health Common Services Authority.
[3] As most staff in the relevant pay groups are paid on local pay scales and details of occupation are not available centrally, no reliable information can be given.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many staff he employs in *(a)* Wales and *(b)* London; and what were the equivalent figures since 1980. [28064]

Mr. Hague: The number of full-time equivalent staff employed in my Department in *(a)* Wales and *(b)* London is:

	Wales	*London*
1 April 1996	2,266	29
30 June 1980	2,406	24

Bridges

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is the amount of money committed by his Department for carrying out assessments required to plan for the strengthening of bridges required under European Union regulations *(a)* for each local authority in Wales and *(b)* for Wales; and how much is committed for 1995–96 and for 1996–97 showing the totals as a percentage of overall local authority budgets; and if he will make a statement. [28156]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: It is estimated that some £4.5 million will be spent on the trunk road—including M4 motorway—assessment programme. Within this total, £706,000 was expended in 1995–96 and £473,000 is estimated for 1996–97.

Local authorities are responsible for bridges on non-trunk roads. The bulk of local authority resources are not attributed to particular activities and it is for individual authorities to determine the level of resources to allocate to bridges, and other programmes, taking into account statutory responsibilities and local priorities.

River Pollution

Sir Cranley Onslow: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what research he has evaluated about the danger of acidification of the head waters of Welsh rivers as a result of emissions from power stations in *(a)* Pembrokeshire and *(b)* elsewhere. [27919]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: A report commissioned by the Welsh Office entitled "A Review of the Impact of Current and Future Acid Deposition in Wales" was completed in February 1993. I have arranged for a copy to be placed in the Library of the House. This review has led to a survey of acidification in rivers and lakes which is under way: it is planned to publish the results in 1997.

Penyclipe Tunnel

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what maintenance costs have been incurred on the Penyclipe tunnel for each year of its operation. [28453]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The cost of maintenance for each full year of operation has been £240,000.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the overseas visits made by him and each of his Ministers since they were appointed to the Welsh Office; and if he will make a statement. [27900]

Mr. Hague: Ministerial colleagues and I make overseas visits from time to time to promote inward investment into Wales, to assist our businesses in the promotion of their international trade and in relation to European and other issues. A full list of such visits was placed in the Library of the House on Friday 1 March this year. I have subsequently led a short inward investment mission to the USA, and my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State visited Luxembourg to attend an Agriculture Council meeting.

Rail Services

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the rail links between *(a)* north Wales and London Euston, *(b)* north-east Wales and the channel tunnel and *(c)* Holyhead and Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [28408]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The provision of rail links in North Wales is a commercial matter for the railway operators.

Mr. Hanson: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will undertake discussions with the rail regulator with regard to the future levels of service between north and south Wales. [28272]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The franchising director has completed consultation on the south Wales and west draft passenger service requirement. He is assessing the representations he has received and will publish the final requirement in due course.

Services to be provided in addition to the requirement will be a matter for the commercial judgment of the franchisee.

Official Hospitality

Mr. Tony Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much was spent on official hospitality by his Department and all associated agencies in the financial year 1995–96. [28565]

Mr. Hague: The amounts spent on official hospitality in 1995–96 were:

Welsh Office: £22,090

Cadw: £417

HEALTH

Comptroller and Auditor General's Report

Mr. Bayley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will give the name and address of the general practitioner fundholding practice mentioned in paragraph 43 of the Comptroller and Auditor General's report on the "NHS (England) Summarised Accounts 1994–95;" and if he will list the health authority and the job titles of the three members of staff who received relocation payments mentioned in paragraph 48 of the Comptroller and Auditor General's report on the "NHS (England) Summarised Accounts 1994–95". [22988]

Mr. Malone: No. It is not normal practice for Ministers to identify individuals mentioned but not named in such reports.

GP Fundholders

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 30 April, *Official Report,* column *502,* what was the grade of the ex-civil servant who carried out the independent inquiry into the circumstances leading to the failure to enact the secondary legislation in respect of the payment of management allowances to general practitioner fundholders; which branch of his Department that person worked in when last a civil servant; what was the cost of the inquiry; and if the work carried out was tendered for in open competition. [28118]

Mr. Malone: I refer the hon. Member to the reply that I gave him on 25 April at columns *282–83.* Mr. Strachan Heppell, a deputy secretary, was previously the head of the health and social services group in the Department before his retirement from full-time work in 1995. Mr. Heppell was asked to undertake the inquiry because of his prior knowledge of departmental and wider civil service standards and procedures and at no additional cost to the Department.

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 30 April, *Official Report,* column *502,* when the implementation team was set up; what grades of civil servant and how many in each grade have been assigned to it; and how long he expects the team will require to complete the action plan. [28119]

Mr. Malone: A small project team of senior managers has been set up, led by Department's principal establishments and finance officer, to take forward implementation of the inquiry's recommendations. Changes already in hand will address some of the problems identified. Others will require work over several months.

Breast Implants

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received on silicone breast implants in the last year. [28318]

Mr. Horam: We have received 33 representations from hon. Members, members of the public and manufacturers.

Terminally Ill Patients (Prescription Charges)

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to change the rules with regard to exemption from prescription charges for terminally ill patients. [28557]

Mr. Malone: None. Many people who are terminally ill benefit from our extensive exemption arrangements, which are among the most generous in Europe. In 1996–97 we expect 85 per cent. of prescriptions to be dispensed free.

Oral Contraceptives

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 7 March, *Official Report*, columns *321–22*, (1) if the data on myocardial infarction from the Spitzer and Jick studies was made available to the Committee on Safety of Medicines on 13 October 1995; [27751]

(2) if the interim data from the transnational study was made available to the Committee on Safety of Medicines at its meeting on 13 October 1995. [27752]

Mr. Malone: Limited data on myocardial infarction from the Jick study were made available to the committee. The committee considered the data on venous thromboembolism from the transnational study at its meeting on 13 October 1995, but no data on myocardial infarction from this study were available to the Medicines Control Agency or the Committee on Safety of Medicines at that time.

Mr. Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 25 March, *Official Report*, column *428*, if his officials assisted the chairman of the Committee on Safety of Medicines in drafting the letter of 18 October relating to oral contraceptives containing desogestrel and gestodene. [27753]

Mr. Malone: The letter was drafted by the chairman of the Committee on Safety of Medicines on the basis of the committee's recommendations. Officials were involved in making minor amendments to the letter. The final version was agreed by the chairman.

Mr. Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reasons he is unable to make available the advice from the Committee on Safety of Medicines of 13 October 1995 on oral contraceptives. [27756]

Mr. Malone: The advice of the Committee on Safety of Medicines is considered to be a confidential communication between the committee and the licensing authority. Such communications are not normally published because they may contain information which is sensitive for commercial reasons or because their disclosure would undermine the policy-making process.

However, on this occasion, in the interests of public health, the advice given by the CSM at the meeting on 13 October 1995 was sent out in a letter from the chairman dated 18 October 1995 to all doctors and pharmacists. Copies of this letter are available in the Library.

Mr. Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list those members of the transnational study team which his officials met on the afternoon of 9 October 1995. [27759]

Mr. Malone: Professor W. Spitzer and Dr. K. MacRae.

Mr. Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the Committee on Safety of Medicines has made an assessment of the safety of desogestrel and gestodene since the publication of January 1996. [27760]

Mr. Malone: I refer the hon. Member to the reply that I gave him on 25 April at column *281*.

Mianserin

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 25 March, *Official Report*, column *427*, if he will list the dates between 1981 and 1990 when the Committee on Safety of Medicines considered safety issues relating to the antidepressant mianserin. [27754]

Mr. Malone: Matters relating to the safety of mianserin were discussed at meetings of the Committee on Safety of Medicines on the following occasions:

December 1981
February 1982
September 1982
April 1983
July 1985
January 1986
April 1986
September 1987
October 1987
March 1988
November 1988
December 1988
February 1989
September 1990
October 1990
November 1990
December 1990.

Committee on Safety of Medicines

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the "Dear Doctor" letters sent since 1980 by chairmen of the Committee on Safety of Medicines to the medical profession, indicating for each the dates they were sent, the product concerned and the dates of any accompanying licensing action; and if he will make a statement. [27755]

Mr. Malone: The "Dear Doctor" letters sent by the Committee on Safety of Medicines to the medical profession since 1980 are shown in the table. Information regarding any licensing action taken in respect of some of the products listed in the letters is confidential. The relevant information for the others could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Title	Date of letter	Products containing the following drug substance(s)
Combined oral contraceptives and thromboembolism	18 October 1995	Combined oral contraceptives containing gestodene or desogestrel
High-lipase pancreatins—reports of colonic strictures	21 December 1993	High strength pancreatic enzyme preparations
Withdrawal of triazolam	1 October 1991	Triazolam
Terodiline (Micturin) and adverse cardiac reactions	25 July 1991	Terodiline
Withdrawal of Pacitron and Optimex	12 April 1990	L-tryptophan
Desensitising vaccines (Allergen extracts) and anaphylaxis	8 October 1986	Desensitising vaccines containing allergen extracts
Reye's syndrome and aspirin use by children	10 June 1986	Paediatric aspirin products
Phenylbutazone and oxyphenbutazone	7 March 1984	Phenylbutezone and oxyphenbutazone
Use of combined oral contraceptive pills and cancer	20 October 1983	Combined oral contraceptives
Etomidate (Hypnomidate injection and infusion)—PL 0242/0019,0082	20 June 1983	Etomidate
Etomidate (Hypnomidate for infusion)—PL 0242/0082	1 June 1983	Etomidate
Opren suspension of product licences	3 August 1982	Benoxaprofen

Mr. Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which current or past members or chairmen of the Committee on Safety of Medicines haye been appointed for longer than the period prescribed in paragraph 4 of the Medicines Commission and Committees Regulations 1970; and if he will make a statement. [27757]

Mr. Malone: None.

Mr. Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health on what occasions members of the Committee on Safety of Medicines have made representations *(a)* to him and *(b)* to the chairman of the committee indicating that the advice emanating from a subset of the committee which met on 13 October 1995 should be withdrawn. [27758]

Mr. Malone: None.

Adoption

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to introduce legislation based on Her Majesty's Government's consultation document on adoption published in March of this year; and if he will make a statement. [28244]

Mr. Bowis: We hope to introduce new legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows.

Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease

Mr. Alan W. Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* confirmed and *(b)* suspected cases of the new strain of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease there have been to date. [28521]

Mr. Horam: One further case of the new variant of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease has been confirmed since the announcement on 20 March that 10 cases had been identified.

Surplus Property

Mr. Milburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 23 April, *Official Report*, column *106*, (1) if he will provide a list of *(a)* properties sold in each of the last three years and (b) properties that are currently for sale indicating their location, former use and market value; [27287]

(2) if he will provide a list of properties that have definitely been identified as being for sale, indicating their location and market value. [27288]

Mr. Horam *[holding answer 30 April 1996]:* Information on properties sold in the last three years is not available centrally.

A list of non-trust national health service properties which are currently for sale will be placed in the Library.

It would be inappropriate to quote market values for individual properties as this could prejudice negotiations with prospective purchasers.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Firearms Amnesty

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what happened to the weapons collected under the 1989 firearms amnesty; and how many were destroyed. [28115]

Mr. Maclean: Of the 47,902 firearms surrendered to police forces during the September 1988 amnesty, approximately 3,000 were allocated to suitably authorised, publicly funded museums and other public bodies with a legitimate interest in the historical or scientific development of weapons. The remainder were destroyed.

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many weapons were collected under the 1989 firearms amnesty; and how many were self-loading rifles. [28114]

Mr. Maclean: The last firearms amnesty was held in September 1988. A total of 47,902 firearms were surrendered to police forces in Great Britain. Of these, a total of 342 were self-loading rifles.

Prevention of Terrorism Act (Arrests)

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many arrests there have been under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (Temporary Provisions) 1989

in each year; how many of those arrested have been charged; and how many have been convicted of an offence. [28113]

Mr. Howard:

Great Britain

Year	Detained	Charged	Excluded, deported or removed
1989[1]	181	21	12
1990	193	28	16
1991	153	7	11
1992	160	38	1
1993	152	32	4
1994	61	9	4
1995	34	13	0

The table also shows figures for those who may not have been charged with an offence but were excluded, deported, or removed.

Figures for convictions are not readily available on a year-to-year basis. From January 1989 to December 1995, 22 people detained under the prevention of terrorism legislation were convicted of offences under the Act(s)*, and 75 people were convicted of offences under other legislation.

In addition, since 1989 nine people have been removed to Northern Ireland, charged and subsequently convicted of offences.

Northern Ireland

Year	Detained	Charged
1989[1]	1,583	360
1990	1,549	370
1991	1,680	386
1992	1,795	460
1993	1,641	382
1994	1,503	367
1995	443	108

Figures on convictions in Northern Ireland are not readily available and would be collected in the time available only at disproportionate cost.

[1] The Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1989 came into effect on 22 March 1989. These figures may include some people who were detained and/or convicted under the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1984 from 1 January 1989 to 22 March.

Remand Prisoners

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the current average time a prisoner spends on remand; and what was the figure in 1979. [28108]

Miss Ann Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Butler to Mr. Ian Pearson, dated 9 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question about the current average time a prisoner spends on remand; and what was the figure in 1979.

Information for 1995 is given in the attached table. Information for 1979 is published in table 2.1 of the 1989 edition of 'Prison statistics, England and Wales', a copy of which is in the Library.

Estimated average time spent in custody for untried and convicted unsentenced prisoners, in Prison Service establishments in England and Wales in 1995[(1)] by sex.

Type of custody	Estimated average number of days in custody[4] Male	Female
Untried[2]	56	43
Convicted Unsentenced[3]	34	30

[1] Provisional figures.

[2] Time spent in custody before conviction.

[3] Time spent in custody after conviction before sentence.

[4] Estimated from number of receptions and average population in 1995.

Notifiable Offences

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many notifiable offences were recorded by the police: how many persons were *(a)* cautioned by the police and *(b)* found guilty at (i) magistrates courts, (ii) Crown courts, (iii) both courts and *(c)* found guilty or cautioned in (1) 1980 and (2) 1995 in the Metropolitan police area. [28022]

Mr. Maclean: Information for 1980, 1994 and 1995 is given in the table below.

Summary of criminal justice statistics 1980, 1994 and 1995

Metropolitan Police Area

	1980	1994	1995[1]
Notifiable offences recorded	584,137	849,976	840,478
Indictable offences			
Cautions	8,464	37,167	—
Convictions—magistrates' courts	68,659	39,603	—
Crown court	15,140	13,156	—
All courts	83,799	52,759	—
Total cautioned and convicted	92,263	89,926	—

[1] 1995 cautioning and convictions data will not be available until the autumn 1996.

Rifle and Pistol Clubs

Mr. Touhig: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many approved rifle and pistol clubs there were in the United Kingdom during *(a)* 1980, *(b)* 1985, *(c)* 1992, *(d)* 1993, *(e)* 1994 and *(f)* 1995. [28264]

Mr. Maclean: There are currently 2,160 approved clubs in the United Kingdom. Information about the number of clubs in previous years is available only at disproportionate cost.

Pursuant to my reply of 21 March to the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr Corbyn), column *295*, I should like to correct the figure quoted at that time for approved rifle and pistol clubs in England and Wales which is now known to be incorrect. The correct figure is 1,871.

Abusive Telephone Calls

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many convictions there have been in each of the past 15 years related to abusive and threatening telephone calls; and if he will make a statement. [27565]

Mr. Maclean: It is not possible, from the information held centrally to identify offences relating to "the sending, by means of public telecommunicating system, a message or other matter that is grossly offensive or of an indecent, obscene or menacing character" from other summary offences pertaining to the appropriate Acts.

Police and Fire Services

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to establish police and fire service funds to meet future pension liabilities for new entrants to which both employers and employees would pay contributions; and if he will make a statement. [28247]

Mr. Maclean : The Government have no plans to make the police and fire service pension schemes funded ones. Like most other public service pension schemes, they are financed on a "pay-as-you-go" basis.

Official Hospitality

Mr. Tony Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much was spent on official hospitality by his Department and all associated agencies in the financial year 1995–96. [28572]

Mr. Howard: The provisional figure for expenditure on official hospitality by my Department and its executive agencies in the financial year 1995–96 is £32,331. This differs from the projected budget of £60,570 given in my reply of 18 December, *Official Report,* column *969*, principally because of a significant reduction in forecast expenditure on hospitality by the Forensic Science Service executive agency.

"Wheelclamping on Private Land"

Mr. Tipping: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he published "Wheelclamping on Private Land"; when the consultation period ended; and when he intends to bring forward proposals to deal with the issue. [28413]

Mr. Maclean *[holding answer 8 May 1996]:* The consultation paper "Wheelclamping on Private Land" was published on 23 February 1993, with a request for response by 31 May 1993. The consultation exercise produced a great deal of useful information but no consensus about a solution. We are considering what action, if any, should be taken to regulate this activity.

Clear-up and Conviction Rates

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what have been the conviction rates in cases involving a plea of not guilty for each police authority in each of the last five years in (i) violent crime, (ii) car crime, and (iii) other serious crime; and if he will make a statement. [28228]

Mr. Maclean *[holding answer 8 May 1996]:* Information regarding plea data is not available.

Mr. Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on conviction rates across England and Wales. [28234]

Mr. Maclean *[holding answer 8 May 1996]:* Information is published annually in the Command Paper "Criminal Statistics, England and Wales" on the number of prosecutions and convictions, from which the conviction rate can be calculated. Copies of the Command Paper are in the Library.

Mr. Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what have been the *(a)* crime clear-up and *(b)* conviction rates for each police authority area in each of the last five years in (i) violent crime, (ii) car crime, and (iii) other serious crime; and if he will make a statement. [28229]

Mr. Maclean *[holding answer 8 May 1996]:* The available information is given in the following tables. Information on conviction rates for 1995 will not be available until the autumn.

Table 1: Clear-up rates for violent crime[1] by police force area 1991–95

Police force area	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*
Avon and Somerset	70	65	65	71	75
Bedfordshire	62	62	60	61	57
Cambridgeshire	80	77	77	77	73
Cheshire	89	84	84	86	86
Cleveland	74	71	71	64	68
Cumbria	86	85	90	85	88
Derbyshire	82	82	81	81	76
Devon and Cornwall	82	57	77	77	77
Dorset	83	77	85	78	85
Durham	83	85	83	86	83
Essex	75	75	76	77	74
Gloucestershire	81	74	69	77	75
Greater Manchester	65	63	58	59	53
Hampshire	78	78	78	76	78
Hertfordshire	87	73	71	75	77
Humberside	74	67	62	63	66
Kent	73	76	75	79	80
Lancashire	80	75	76	74	72
Leicestershire	74	73	71	74	75

Table 1: Clear-up rates for violent crime[1] by police force area 1991–95

Police force area	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*
Lincolnshire	93	83	84	83	87
City of London	66	43	38	66	62
Merseyside	58	56	56	55	57
Metropolitan Police	46	44	47	50	48
Norfolk	83	82	79	83	74
Northamptonshire	75	79	81	88	79
Northumbria	71	65	68	67	64
North Yorkshire	88	91	86	79	80
Nottinghamshire	71	68	68	67	72
South Yorkshire	79	79	69	74	71
Staffordshire	83	83	79	84	83
Suffolk	83	87	80	88	86
Surrey	77	72	75	83	80
Sussex	65	70	65	62	73
Thames Valley	69	68	73	69	72
Warwickshire	77	80	78	82	81
West Mercia	87	85	84	82	79
West Midlands	65	60	55	51	45
West Yorkshire	74	77	68	70	68
Wiltshire	[2]104	94	94	94	91
Dyfed-Powys	91	94	96	96	94
Gwent	90	91	91	91	92
North Wales	90	89	90	90	89
South Wales	83	82	81	73	74
England and Wales	68	66	65	66	65

[1] Includes the notifiable offence groups of violence against the person, sexual offences and robbery.
[2] Offences cleared up in current year may have been initially recorded in an earlier year.

Table 2: Clear-up rates for vehicle crime[1] by police force area 1991–95

Police force area	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*
Avon and Somerset	14	7	7	10	9
Bedfordshire	10	10	10	13	11
Cambridgeshire	32	14	13	13	7
Cheshire	27	15	12	13	12
Cleveland	32	27	24	12	14
Cumbria	27	21	22	26	28
Derbyshire	16	12	10	11	8
Devon and Cornwall	16	8	12	14	13
Dorset	39	16	15	14	10
Durham	18	19	17	18	19
Essex	25	16	20	26	21
Gloucestershire	16	12	8	9	13
Greater Manchester	31	29	29	27	17
Hampshire	16	14	12	13	13
Hertfordshire	23	17	14	13	20
Humberside	23	16	9	8	9
Kent	10	13	13	14	10
Lancashire	36	25	26	22	23
Leicestershire	22	24	22	23	18
Lincolnshire	34	26	26	22	28
City of London	11	7	13	21	9
Merseyside	42	43	34	25	15
Metropolitan Police	6	6	5	8	10
Norfolk	34	26	17	22	19
Northamptonshire	30	28	19	21	19
Northumbria	34	8	11	16	16
North Yorkshire	24	19	17	13	10
Nottinghamshire	17	16	21	22	12
South Yorkshire	31	18	11	14	14
Staffordshire	31	24	23	23	22
Suffolk	24	20	15	17	15
Surrey	14	15	10	16	23
Sussex	9	9	10	10	17
Thames Valley	12	11	12	13	15
Warwickshire	15	15	13	13	16
West Mercia	26	25	18	19	13
West Midlands	26	22	21	19	18
West Yorkshire	22	18	9	10	11
Wiltshire	23	19	16	18	14
Dyfed-Powys	45	37	35	38	42

Table 2: Clear-up rates for vehicle crime[1] by police force area 1991–95

Police force area	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*
Gwent	33	23	29	29	29
North Wales	25	21	25	24	18
South Wales	26	26	24	18	26
England and Wales	21	17	15	16	15

[1] Includes the notifiable offences of theft from a vehicle, theft or unauthorised taking of a motor vehicle and aggravated vehicle taking.

Table 3: Clear-up rates for other serious crime[1] by police force area 1991–95

Police force area	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*
Avon and Somerset	25	19	19	22	25
Bedfordshire	22	22	23	23	25
Cambridgeshire	34	28	26	24	20
Cheshire	43	31	28	32	34
Cleveland	31	31	26	20	26
Cumbria	42	39	40	36	39
Derbyshire	28	22	20	21	21
Devon and Cornwall	30	19	27	28	29
Dorset	40	35	36	33	30
Durham	32	31	32	33	31
Essex	31	31	34	37	34
Gloucestershire	41	27	23	27	28
Greater Manchester	37	37	35	35	25
Hampshire	30	27	27	28	29
Hertfordshire	35	26	22	26	28
Humberside	31	22	16	17	19
Kent	26	29	27	30	29
Lancashire	40	40	38	36	37
Leicestershire	28	29	27	28	29
Lincolnshire	45	39	36	31	37
City of London	20	21	22	26	24
Merseyside	44	41	39	34	28
Metropolitan Police	18	17	18	24	24
Norfolk	35	34	29	35	32
Northamptonshire	28	27	27	30	28
Northumbria	34	18	20	22	23
North Yorkshire	37	34	32	26	25
Nottinghamshire	27	26	29	26	22
South Yorkshire	35	27	21	25	25
Staffordshire	35	28	27	28	30
Suffolk	38	40	39	35	35
Surrey	23	21	20	30	29
Sussex	25	26	27	27	28
Thames Valley	24	21	23	24	24
Warwickshire	26	24	22	26	25
West Mercia	35	34	29	29	30
West Midlands	30	26	27	25	25
West Yorkshire	27	25	19	21	22
Wiltshire	40	37	36	36	32
Dyfed-Powys	46	51	48	49	54
Gwent	48	47	46	49	52
North Wales	35	32	34	38	32
South Wales	27	28	26	23	26
England and Wales	30	27	26	27	27

[1] All notifiable offences excluding violent crime, vehicle crime and criminal damage under £20.

Table 4: Conviction rates for indictable violent crime[1] offences by police force area 1990–94

Police force area	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*
Avon and Somerset	52	47	40	38	40
Bedfordshire	51	45	41	38	44
Cambridgeshire	58	54	54	52	45
Cheshire	71	67	62	63	63
Cleveland	63	55	49	45	45
Cumbria	71	69	65	62	60
Derbyshire	68	61	57	52	44
Devon and Cornwall	77	65	67	57	52
Dorset	63	54	55	60	51
Durham	53	54	52	54	54

Table 4: Conviction rates for indictable violent crime[1] offences by police force area 1990–94

Police force area	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*
Essex	60	52	47	49	42
Gloucestershire	66	53	54	48	48
Greater Manchester	64	60	54	54	49
Hampshire	66	60	56	55	54
Hertfordshire	66	52	41	41	38
Humberside	68	67	67	61	61
Kent	79	75	68	59	56
Lancashire	69	64	66	54	56
Leicestershire	66	62	56	50	43
Lincolnshire	69	58	63	56	61
City of London	57	57	50	56	51
Merseyside	48	42	38	39	35
Metropolitan Police	62	55	49	38	40
Norfolk	68	72	75	66	71
Northamptonshire	57	49	49	43	36
Northumbria	58	56	52	51	51
North Yorkshire	69	59	59	57	55
Nottinghamshire	59	51	49	44	36
South Yorkshire	64	59	56	54	51
Staffordshire	53	53	47	45	46
Suffolk	65	65	58	61	55
Surrey	62	55	49	46	45
Sussex	61	57	50	51	47
Thames Valley	62	53	55	51	45
Warwickshire	75	74	68	64	60
West Mercia	69	67	58	59	55
West Midlands	62	56	51	51	51
West Yorkshire	68	60	54	54	48
Wiltshire	66	63	57	51	49
Dyfed-Powys	56	54	52	44	40
Gwent	56	54	56	47	53
North Wales	71	68	57	57	54
South Wales	56	54	46	48	44
England and Wales	62	57	53	49	47

[1] Includes the indictable offence groups of violence against the person, sexual offences and robbery.
Indictable offences only have been used as nearest equivalent to notifiable offences.

Table 5: Conviction rates for indictable vehicle crime[1] offences by police force area 1990–94

Police force area	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*
Avon and Somerset	57	54	50	50	62
Bedfordshire	65	50	62	39	54
Cambridgeshire	58	62	53	53	39
Cheshire	73	63	53	69	66
Cleveland	61	57	50	58	50
Cumbria	77	61	60	73	70
Derbyshire	56	59	57	56	60
Devon and Cornwall	82	67	63	65	62
Dorset	65	68	59	55	70
Durham	63	49	51	52	50
Essex	64	59	54	47	54
Gloucestershire	66	64	51	53	57
Greater Manchester	80	69	62	74	57
Hampshire	71	66	63	63	65
Hertfordshire	67	65	53	50	48
Humberside	77	73	64	67	72
Kent	79	74	75	71	67
Lancashire	76	72	74	67	64
Leicestershire	72	60	58	55	53
Lincolnshire	81	81	69	68	71
City of London	67	[2]106	35	100	62
Merseyside	36	41	42	59	56
Metropolitan Police	69	63	58	61	64
Norfolk	83	82	80	68	89
Northamptonshire	62	58	50	57	62
Northumbria	61	54	54	62	57
North Yorkshire	75	58	64	58	67
Nottinghamshire	62	53	52	55	60
South Yorkshire	68	72	64	65	63
Staffordshire	49	52	41	57	64
Suffolk	78	69	57	74	71

Table 5: Conviction rates for indictable vehicle crime[1] offences by police force area 1990–94

Police force area	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*
Surrey	57	55	50	60	51
Sussex	74	63	61	56	62
Thames Valley	67	51	55	58	63
Warwickshire	82	60	54	47	53
West Mercia	61	57	56	52	58
West Midlands	53	47	44	53	52
West Yorkshire	64	62	55	57	54
Wiltshire	81	66	76	82	74
Dyfed-Powys	78	62	47	61	54
Gwent	65	55	54	54	50
North Wales	82	79	62	64	66
South Wales	57	59	49	63	60
England and Wales	66	61	56	60	59

[1] Includes the indictable offences of theft from a vehicle, theft or unauthorised taking of a motor vehicle and aggravated vehicle taking.
[2] Will include persons proceeded against in earlier years or for other offences.

Table 6: Conviction rates for indictable other serious crime[1] offences by police force area 1990–94

Police force area	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*
Avon and Somerset	69	68	67	60	60
Bedfordshire	67	66	64	61	64
Cambridgeshire	77	72	73	69	64
Cheshire	81	75	75	76	76
Cleveland	74	67	64	63	67
Cumbria	82	78	76	75	75
Derbyshire	77	70	70	67	68
Devon and Cornwall	83	74	74	72	68
Dorset	76	70	69	73	68
Durham	69	65	66	67	66
Essex	72	65	67	66	65
Gloucestershire	68	71	67	66	67
Greater Manchester	82	82	79	81	71
Hampshire	75	71	72	69	71
Hertfordshire	78	67	64	65	63
Humberside	80	78	76	75	75
Kent	86	90	85	81	82
Lancashire	76	77	79	71	71
Leicestershire	72	69	68	63	61
Lincolnshire	80	71	77	75	78
City of London	69	68	61	66	65
Merseyside	71	69	65	68	64
Metropolitan Police	84	78	75	68	68
Norfolk	88	83	86	87	88
Northamptonshire	71	69	63	65	62
Northumbria	74	68	67	67	63
North Yorkshire	76	71	68	71	71
Nottinghamshire	73	67	67	66	66
South Yorkshire	77	74	70	70	68
Staffordshire	71	70	68	66	65
Suffolk	78	74	72	71	71
Surrey	72	70	67	67	66
Sussex	76	72	73	70	69
Thames Valley	74	68	66	65	62
Warwickshire	84	79	69	69	68
West Mercia	77	77	73	71	69
West Midlands	74	68	63	63	63
West Yorkshire	75	72	66	63	63
Wiltshire	77	74	74	75	74
Dyfed-Powys	70	68	66	67	60
Gwent	70	68	72	66	69
North Wales	81	83	70	70	72
South Wales	70	69	66	66	66
England and Wales	77	73	71	69	68

[1] Includes the indictable offences excluding violent and car crime offences as in tables above.
Indictable offences only have been used as nearest equivalent to notifiable offences.

Mr. Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what are his definitions of *(a)* crime clear-up rates and *(b)* conviction rates. [28230]

Mr. Maclean *[holding answer 8 May 1996]:* The clear-up rate is the number of offences cleared up as a percentage of the number of offences recorded, excluding

offences of criminal damage value £20 and under. The conviction rate is the number of convictions at all courts as a percentage of prosecutions.

Mr. Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the changes made to the crime clear-up rates statistical methodology over the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [28238]

Mr. Maclean *[holding answer 8 May 1996]:* There have ben no changes to the statistical methodology for clear-up rates. Since 1994, the Home Office has adopted the Audit Commission definitions of primary and secondary clear-ups, but this has no effect on the number of offences cleared up or on the overall clear-up rate. The definitions are given in note 4 of Home Office statistical bulletin 3/96, a copy of which is available in the Library.

Prisons (Drugs)

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people have been successfully prosecuted in each of the last six years for smuggling illegal drugs into prisons; and if he will make a statement. [28232]

Mr. Maclean *[holding answer 8 May 1996]:* The location of an offence committed under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 is not recorded centrally.

Ministerial Group on Juveniles

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the Ministerial group on juveniles met; and what *(a)* reports and *(b)* initiatives have been published as a result of the meeting. [28239]

Mr. Maclean *[holding answer 8 May 1996]:* The ministerial group on juveniles met on 18 January and 13 March. A press notice published after the group's inaugural meeting announced a programme of work, which is now being taken forward, to strengthen measures for intervening effectively with those children who are most at risk of offending. This work will include the publication of practical guidance to help local agencies ensure a co-ordinated approach to identifying and dealing with these children.

Child Abuse (North Wales)

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what consultations he has had with the chief constable of North Wales concerning compensation payments to alleged victims of child abuse at North Wales children's homes in circumstances where no proceedings have been taken against those allegedly guilty of the abuse; [27624]

(2) how many alleged victims of child abuse in North Wales children's homes have been paid compensation by the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board; and how many such payments involved victims allegedly abused by persons against whom no police proceedings have taken place. [27627]

Mr. Maclean *[holding answers 8 May 1996]:* I have not had any consultations with the chief constable of the North Wales police on this matter.

I understand that to date the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board has made 27 awards of compensation and refused 14 applications. The number of payments made where no prosecution resulted is not readily available. However, the standard of proof required under the compensation scheme is that obtaining in the civil courts, namely "the balance of probabilities", not the stricter standard of "beyond reasonable doubt" required in the criminal courts. It is accordingly within the board's discretion to make awards in cases where no prosecution is brought.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Beef Exports

10. **Mr. William Ross:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what percentage of United Kingdom beef exports is represented by beef exported from Northern Ireland. [27466]

Mr. Baldry: Beef exports from Northern Ireland accounted for approximately 28 per cent. of total UK beef exports in 1995.

14. **Mr. Maclennan:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress he has made in promoting the full resumption of the international beef trade; and if he will make a statement. [27471]

Mr. Douglas Hogg: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the statement I made on 1 May, *Official Report*, columns *1147–48*.

15. **Mr. Dykes:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on developments in European Union beef markets. [27472]

Mr. Baldry: EU beef markets are, to say the least, extremely turbulent at the present time.

18. **Mr. Duncan:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made on the implications of the EU ban for the future of the beef industry. [27476]

Mr. Baldry: The United Kingdom's long and distinguished history as a trading nation has benefited considerably in recent years from a significant export trade in beef and beef products. The cessation of that trade directly threatens thousands of British jobs, severe financial hardship for those involved and possibly irreparable damage to the structure and profitability of the British beef industry.

19. **Mr. Lidington:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent representations he has made to his German counterpart about the European Community ban on British beef. [27477]

Mr. Douglas Hogg: I have been in contact with my German counterpart, Joachim Borchert, on numerous occasions over the last few weeks during which time I have consistently and forcefully impressed upon him the fact that the export ban is unjustified and should be lifted forthwith.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement about the penalties for a breach of the EC ban on the export of British beef and beef products by a British exporter, and about how such penalties would be enforced. [27350]

Mrs. Browning: It would be an offence under the Products of Animal Origin (Import and Export) Regulations 1992 (SI 1992 No 3298), as amended, to export or to consign for export to another member state, British beef or beef products without the necessary export health certification. These export certificates have been withdrawn by the Government following the EC ban. A copy of the regulations is available in the Library of the House. The penalties applying are set out in regulation 28. Enforcement of the regulations is shared between the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the local authority concerned. In practice local authorities generally take prosecutions under the regulations. Under regulation 3 the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and in some circumstances the Secretaries of State for Scotland, for Wales and for Health, have powers to act where a local authority has failed to enforce.

All export certificates required by third countries to accompany consignments of British beef and beef products have also been withdrawn. Operational staff at all Customs export stations have been informed of the terms of the EC ban and have been instructed to refuse to release for export to third countries any goods covered by the ban. Customs' legal powers in respect of properly declared goods of the descriptions covered by the Commission decision extend no further than refusing permission to export. Failure to present goods for such export, however, is an offence under the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979.

In the case of wilful breach of Customs controls, for example by misdescription of banned beef and beef products, powers in the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979 provide for the prosecution of offenders and in some circumstances the forfeiture of goods. The commissioners of Customs and Excise will consider prosecution of such offences in individual cases using the criteria that they apply in all prosecutions.

Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy

11. **Mr. Stevenson:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he last met consumers' representatives to discuss measures to control bovine spongiform encephalopathy. [27467]

Mr. Douglas Hogg: Yesterday.

17. **Mr. Turner:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he last met with consumers' representatives to discuss measures to control bovine spongiform encephalopathy. [27475]

Mr. Hogg: Yesterday afternoon.

22. **Mr. Etherington:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he last met farmers' representatives to discuss bovine spongiform encephalopathy. [27480]

Mrs. Browning: My ministerial colleagues and I are in frequent contact with farmers' representatives. We are always willing to discuss the current difficulties and to listen to their views.

26. **Mr. Kevin Hughes:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what advice he has given to knackers' yards and the rendering industry in relation to implementation of new BSE regulations. [27484]

Mrs. Browning: The rendering industry and knackers' yards have been kept fully informed of the requirements of the new BSE regulations as they affect these sectors.

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will initiate a comprehensive inquiry into the cause of the duration of the problems in respect of BSE. [27473]

Mr. Douglas Hogg: The ruminant feed ban introduced in 1988 has been instrumental in reducing the number of confirmed cases by 75 per cent. since the peak in 1993. It is clear that the ban was not completely watertight and it has been progressively tightened, most recently to prevent mammalian meat and bone meal being fed to any farm animals. But the benefits of the more recent measures will take some time to see, as the disease has a long incubation period.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the effect of the culling proposals agreed at the Council of Ministers at Luxembourg on 29 and 30 April on the incidence of BSE in Untied Kingdom beef and dairy herds. [28305]

Mrs. Browning: No agreement was reached at the Agriculture Council on 29 and 30 April on culling cattle. The impact of the proposals we put forward cannot be estimated with precision but could in theory reduce the number of cases in 1996 by up to a third and should in practice achieve a reduction of between 15 and 30 per cent.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what research his Department has carried out into BSE in each of the last 10 years; and how much of this research has been to identify the BSE infective agent. [24420]

Mrs. Browning: Details of BSE research funded by MAFF since 1991–92 will be placed in the Library today. The projects which involve work to identify the BSE infective agent are listed separately.

Research records prior to 1991 are not held on computer; to provide the information for the period requested could only be done at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the number of suspected BSE cases per year since 1988 as a percentage of the national herd in that year. [24240]

Mrs. Browning: The number of suspected BSE cases per year since 1988 as a percentage of the national herd in that year are detailed in the following table:

Year	*Percentage*
1988	0.066
1989	0.220
1990	0.442
1991	0.770
1992	1.140
1993	1.112
1994	0.751
1995	0.445

Mr. Key: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on what scientific evidence the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee decided that

masseter and temporal muscles in cattle heads over six months of age should be treated as specified bovine offal; and if he will make a statement. [24215]

Mrs. Browning: The Government sought advice from the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee on this point. The committee recommended that the removal of bovine head meat from bovine heads should be prohibited because they were concerned at the possibility of such meat being contaminated with brain material following stunning and pithing, rather than because of concerns about the safety of meat itself.

Animal Slaughter

12. **Mr. Llwyd:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what support his Department is offering to the abattoir sector; and if he will make a statement. [27469]

Mr. Baldry: My right hon. and learned Friend announced on 16 April a £110 million package of support for the slaughtering sector. Following consultation, we have revised the operation of the stock purchase element of this scheme, in particular to maximise the help it gives to companies involved in the export trade. I am placing details in the Library.

Farm Animal Welfare

13. **Ms Corston:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received concerning the welfare of farm animals. [27470]

Mrs. Browning: We continue to receive a high volume of comment on animal welfare issues.

Set-aside

16. **Dr. Goodson-Wickes:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the benefits to wildlife of the set-aside procedure. [27474]

Mr. Baldry: The Ministry is funding an evaluation of set-aside which examines its impact on plants, insects and birds. Research has shown that set-aside land can support significantly more wildlife than nearby cropped fields.

Dairy Imports

20. **Mr. Pike:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what percentage of *(a)* milk and *(b)* dairy products in the United Kingdom is imported from other EU nations. [27478]

Mr. Baldry: The figures are as follows:

Imports from EU	*Percentage of total UK availability (domestic production plus total imports)*
Milk	1
Butter	22
Cheese	33
Skimmed milk powder	11
Full cream powder	8
Condensed milk	6

Dairy Sector

21. **Mr. Luff:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the impact of the fall in domestic consumption of beef and the European Union world-wide ban on British beef exports on the United Kingdom dairy farming sector. [27479]

Mr. Baldry: The crisis of confidence in British beef and the EU ban on UK beef exports will have affected the dairy sector in several ways. Continental markets for surplus dairy calves have been lost completely and markets at home for beef calves and store cattle knocked back. As a result of the export ban, and national measures to keep out of the human food chain meat from animals aged more than 30 months, there is no longer any market outlet for dairy cows which have reached the end of their productive lives. Measures which provide alternative outlets for male pure-bred dairy calves and cattle aged over 30 months have announced by my right hon. and learned Friend on the 28 March and 16 April respectively.

Cattle Slaughter (Costs)

23. **Mr. Foulkes:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the average cost of the slaughter and destruction of a cow. [27481]

Mrs. Browning: Meat and Livestock Commission estimates suggest that the average cost is between £55 and £60 per animal.

Common Fisheries Policy

24. **Mrs. Ewing:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he last met representatives of the fishing industry to discuss the common fisheries policy; and if he will make a statement. [27482]

Mr. Baldry: I met representatives of the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations at its annual general meeting on 3 May when we discussed the common fisheries policy and other current issues.

Arable Area Payments

25. **Mr. Tipping:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the value of payments made under the arable area payments scheme in 1995. [27483]

Mr. Baldry: Payments under the arable area payments scheme in the United Kingdom in the 1995–96 financial year are estimated to total £1,304.9 million.

Organophosphates

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what research *(a)* he has commissioned and *(b)* evaluated which has been carried out into the effect of organophosphates upon (i) humans and (ii) animals. [28095]

Mrs. Browning: Between 1991 and 1994 the national poisons unit, London, was funded by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to conduct studies into the effects on human health from acute exposure to organophosphorus sheep dips. Jointly with the Department of Health and the Health and Safety Executive, MAFF has also awarded a contract worth £500,000 to the Institute of Occupational Medicine in Edinburgh to carry out an epidemiological study designed

to detect well-defined, predetermined chronic effects in humans of dipping sheep with OP sheep dips. This study is expected to be competed in April 1999.

No current research into the effects of organophosphates on animals is being undertaken by MAFF. Every veterinary medicine must satisfy statutory criteria of safety, quality and efficacy, and responsibility for undertaking or providing information on the necessary research to meet these criteria rests with applicants for marketing authorisations. That research is evaluated as part of the authorisation process. We have, however, agreed two major research projects, worth £1.2 million over three years, on alternatives to organophosphorus sheep dips.

There is also a very large quantity of published scientific literature on organophosphates, including papers on the effects in animals and humans, which is considered by the Veterinary Medicines Directorate as part of the continuing review of the use of OP sheep dips by the Veterinary Products Committee. References to these are widely available from commercial databases.

Slaughterhouses

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many slaughterhouses have closed since 1 January 1993 on the grounds that they did not meet the structural requirements of directive 91/497/EEC. [27863]

Mrs. Browning: No figures are available to show how many slaughterhouses have closed since 1 January 1993 on the ground that they did not meet the structural requirements of directive 91/497/EEC. Slaughterhouses can close for a number of reasons, including commercial pressures arising from the significant overcapacity in the red meat slaughtering industry. In addition, if one operator decides to close, the premises may be taken over by another.

Meat Hygiene Service

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) how many customers are currently disputing the bills submitted to them by the Meat Hygiene Service; [28335]

(2) how many customers to date have refused to pay some or all bills submitted to them by the Meat Hygiene Service since the inception of the service. [28334]

Mrs. Browning *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* I have asked the chief executive of the Meat Hygiene Service to reply.

Letter from Johnston McNeill to Mr. Edward O'Hara, dated 9 May 1996:

As Chief Executive of the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) your questions to the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food concerning the number of customers currently disputing and refusing to pay the bills submitted to them by the MHS has been passed to me for reply. (28335 + 28334)

124 customers are currently disputing the bills submitted to them by the MHS. 125 customers have refused to pay some or all bills since the launch of the MHS on 1 April 1995.

As you may be aware the majority of these outstanding debts relate to payment strikes by some plants in support of the Woodspring Case, a civil action brought by Woodspring District Council against Bakers of Nailsea to recover unpaid meat inspection charges. The Association of District Councils calculated that by the end of the 1994–95 financial year, local authorities would be owed some £2.5 million in unpaid charges. The High Court found in favour of Woodspring Council in 1994, but the case is under appeal and also being considered by the European Court of Justice. A judgement is expected in the autumn of 1996. However, I would like to stress that the MHS continues to provide a 100% inspection service to all customers regardless of whether there is a dispute over the charge for the services. The MHS also allowed for debt arising from the Woodspring Case in its 1995–96 Business Plan. Costs arising as a result of Specified Bovine Material enforcement action by the MHS are paid for by central Government.

The Agency does operate rigorous debt recovery procedures. Invoices which remain unpaid after 21 days and which are not subject to query are passed to the Legal Department of MAFF who issue a warning "letter" before action. The intention is that a summons will be issued 14 days later unless payment has been received in the meantime.

Common Agricultural Policy

Mr. Stewart: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the annual cost to the United Kingdom of membership of the common agricultural policy. [28403]

Mr. Baldry: Exchequer expenditure on the common agricultural policy reflects payments in the Untied Kingdom and contributions to expenditure in other member states through our net contribution to the EC budget. Our theoretical share of the cost of the CAP budget for 1996 would be around £3.6 billion after the Fontainebleau abatement is taken into account and assuming receipts estimated at £2.8 billion.

In addition the CAP imposes costs on consumers estimated for 1993 at some £3 per week per person. A note setting out the calculations of the costs to UK taxpayers and consumers has been placed in the Library of the House.

Set-aside Scheme

Sir Ralph Howell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will state the area of set-aside in *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* France in each year since set-aside began; and if he will state the percentage of agricultural land which this represents in each year and the total payment in each country in each year. [28563]

Mr. Baldry *[holding answer 8 May 1996]:* I list the information requested which relates to set-aside under the arable area payments scheme.

	1992–93	*1993–94*	*1994–95*
Set-aside area (thousands)			
UK	573	662	597
France	1,590	1,934	1,727
Set-aside as a percentage of land on which AAPS claimed			
UK	[1]13.7	[1]15.4	[1]14.0
France	[1]12.3	[1]14.6	[1]13.1
Total set-aside payments (mecu)			
UK	189	254	233
France	517	792	722

[1]per cent.

Fishing Vessels (Decommissioning)

Mr. Merchant: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what provision he has made to decommission fishing vessels in 1996; and if he will make a statement. [29215]

Mr. Baldry: I have laid before the House the fishing vessel decommissioning scheme 1996 which comes into force today. We want decommissioning to provide real long-term benefits to the fishing industry. By reducing pressure on fish stocks, the scheme can help conservation and improve fishing prospects for the future. To this end, we must ensure that expenditure is effective and provides good value for money.

We have determined the criteria to be used in the 1996 decommissioning scheme in the light of comments from the industry on our recent consultation paper and the cumulative value for public money obtained from the schemes so far and changes in the structure fo the fleet. The 1996 scheme will be opened up to more vessels on improved terms which take account of the comments made by the industry itself.

Key changes being made are:

- a reduction to 75 qualifying days fishing in each of the two previous years;
- the removal of the current restriction on licence type;
- the extension of eligibility to the nephrops and distant water segments.
- the possibility of allowing historic decommissioned vessels to remain afloat if donated to a registered museum.

Some £13 million is now available for decommissioning this year and, as in the 1995 scheme, provision is made to cover the possibility of more than one round of decommissioning during the year. Decisions on the amount to be spent and the number of tenders will take account of value for money represented by the bids received.

Other criteria for the 1996 scheme are similar to the 1995 scheme. The deadline for receipt of grant applications is 25 June 1996.

Small Food Businesses

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the impact of the Government's policies to promote small businesses on United Kingdom farmers and small food businesses. [27464]

Mrs. Browning: The Government are taking a significant number of steps to help small firms—and this includes farming and food businesses—though the Ministry has not made a sectoral study of the impact of this support.

Food Safety

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on Government policy on food safety. [27468]

Mrs. Browning: Our objective is that food sold in the United Kingdom should be safe for consumption. We have systems for identifying food safety risks, taking prompt action and announcing results. They are described in the 1996 departmental report (Cmnd. 3204) which was published recently.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 10 May 1996

ENVIRONMENT

Local Authority Trading Powers

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what recent guidance he has given to the Audit Commission concerning local authority trading powers. [28467]

Sir Paul Beresford: None. My Department did, however, write to the local authority associations on 7 December 1995 on this issue and the Audit Commission was aware of that correspondence.

Landscape Preservation

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list, by English county, the name, location and size in hectares of areas designated by local authorities *(a)* to protect local landscape character and value, *(b)* as quasi-green belts or green wedges, *(c)* to protect historic parkland and gardens and *(d)* further to protect the open countryside. [28878]

Sir Paul Beresford: The Government do not collect this information centrally. Under section 8C of the Historic Buildings and Monuments Act 1953, as amended by the National Heritage Act 1983, English Heritage compiles a register of parks and gardens of special historic interest in England.

Unitary Authorities (SSAs)

Mr. Morley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what was the amount of standard spending assessment per person for *(a)* North Lincolnshire unitary authority, *(b)* North East Lincolnshire unitary authority and *(c)* North Yorkshire unitary authority and Kingston upon Hull unitary authority. [28623]

Sir Paul Beresford: The figures requested are as listed:

	Local Authority	*SSA per head* £
(a)	North Lincolnshire unitary authority	718
(b)	North East Lincolnshire unitary authority	760
(c)	North Yorkshire county council	595
	Kingston upon Hull unitary authority	814

As a county council, North Yorkshire does not provide as wide a range of services as unitary authorities.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Higher Education (Inquiry)

Mr. Mans: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will announce the membership of the national committee of inquiry into higher education, and its terms of reference. [29330]

Mrs. Gillian Shephard: The national committee of inquiry into higher education faces an important and challenging task. Higher education has a vital role to play in raising the levels of the nation's skills and competitiveness and thus enhancing our capacity to generate wealth and to improve our quality of life. The national committee of inquiry will make recommendations on how the purposes, shape, structure, size and funding of higher education should develop to meet the needs of the United Kingdom over the next 20 years. It will have a significant influence on future generations of students, on the development of universities and colleges, and on the wider economy, society and culture of the country.

My right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Scotland, for Wales and for Northern Ireland and I are therefore grateful to all those who responded to our consultations on the committee's composition and draft terms of reference. In the light of those responses, we are pleased to appoint the following members:

Sir Ron Dearing (Chairman) and Professor John Arbuthnott: Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Strathclyde

Baroness Dean of Thornton le Fylde: (formerly Brenda Dean)

Ms Judith Evans: Director of Corporate Personnel, Sainbury's

Sir Ron Garrick Managing Director and Chief Executive of Weir Group

Sir Geoffrey Holland: Vice-Chancellor of the University of Exeter

Professor Diana Laurillard: Pro Vice-Chancellor (Technology Development) of the Open University

Mrs P. A. Morris: Headteacher, The Blue School, Wells

Sir Ronald Oxburgh: Rector of Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine

Dr. David Potter: Chairman of Psion Plc

Sir George Quigley: Chairman of Ulster Bank

Sir William Stubbs: Chief Executive of the Further Education Funding Council and Rector Designate of the London Institute

Sir Richard Sykes: Deputy Chairman and Chief Executive of Glaxo-Wellcome Plc

Professor David Watson: Director of the University of Brighton

Professor Sir David Weatherall: Regius Professor of Medicine at the University of Oxford

Professor Adrian Webb: Vice-Chancellor of the University of Glamorgan

Mr. Simon Wright: Education and Welfare Officer, Students Union, the University of Wales College of Cardiff.

We are grateful to these members for agreeing to serve on this important inquiry.

We are placing a copy of the list of members and the full terms of reference in the Library.

DEFENCE

Gulf War (Chemical Weapons)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent *(a)* evidence and *(b)* reports his Department has received concerning the use of (i) chemical and (ii) biological weapons during the Gulf war. [28725]

Mr. Soames: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) on 16 January, *Official Report*, column *535*.

Procurement Collaboration

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his Department's policy concerning *(a)* European and *(b)* American procurement collaboration; and if he will make a statement. [28729]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The United Kingdom is committed to pursuing greater collaboration armaments procurement both in Europe and with the United States. We have recognised for many years that co-operation with our allies is a most effective means of achieving value for money; the principal forum for this in Europe is the Western European armaments group. I announced on 13 March, *Official Report*, columns *648–49*, that the UK wishes to join France and Germany in their work on setting up an armaments agency.

Equally, we are keen to promote procurement collaboration with the United States. We wish to maintain the UK's extensive two-way business relationship on defence equipment with the US, which we value for strategic reasons and as the sole source of equipment which it would be uneconomic to develop elsewhere.

Territorial Army

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the manpower strength of the Territorial Army at 1 April 1990; and what will be its estimated strength at 1 April 1999. [28727]

Mr. Soames: The manpower strength of the Territorial Army on 1 April 1990 was 74,440. On 14 July 1994 it was announced that the Territorial Army was to be restructured to an establishment of 59,000 by 1 April 1997. Present planning maintains the establishment of the Territorial Army at 59,000 in 1999 and it is hoped that the recruiting and retention initiatives will maintain the TA at this level.

Defence Statistics

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what date he will publish the 1996 UK defence statistics. [28726]

Mr. Arbuthnot: On 18 July 1996.

Army Regiments

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Army regiments there were at 1 April 1990; and what is the current number. [28728]

Mr. Soames: The information requested is given in the table:

Number of major army units at 1 April 1990 and 1 April 1996[1]

Corps	*1 April 1990*	*1 April 1996*
Royal Armoured Corps	[2]19	[2 3]11
Royal Artillery	[2]22	10
Royal Engineers	[4]13	[2]16
Infantry	[5]55	[5]41
Special Air Service	1	1
Army Air Corps	[6]4	[6]5
Royal Corps of Signals	[2]15	[2]12
Total	128	96

[1] The table covers Regular Army units of battalion size or equivalent in the major combat arms.
[2] Includes one training regiment.
[3] Excludes the Household Cavalry mounted regiment.
[4] Includes the Queen's Gurkha Engineers.
[5] Includes Gurkha battalions.
[6] Includes one Territorial Army squadron.

TRANSPORT

Railtrack (Safety of Structures)

Ms Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what estimate he has made of the cost to Railtrack of complying with its safety standards for structures. [28555]

Mr. Watts: I have made no such estimate.

Railtrack has a key role in managing safety on the rail network in its capacity as infrastructure controller and through its compliance with and operation of the railway group standards code, as required by its network licence, in an efficient manner. Railtrack's asset maintenance plan for track and route structures forecasts the expenditure required over the 10-year period from 1 April 1994 for sustaining the operational capability of these assets in accordance with Railtrack's operational policies and standards, including safety standards, and to comply with its statutory obligations.

Rail Service Standards

Ms Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport which train service groups failed to meet their passengers charter standards, when judged by the moving annual average figures, for *(a)* punctuality and *(b)* reliability, for the end of (i) 1994–95 and (ii) 1995–96. [28556]

Mr. Watts: The information requested is as follows:

(i) 52 weeks ending 31 March 1995

(a) Punctuality

Avon
Cardiff Valleys
Central Inter Urban
Cross Country
East Coast
Gatwick Express
Great Northern
Lancashire Local
LTS Rail
Manchester Local
Merseyrail City Line

Mid Wales and Marches
Northampton Lines
North London Lines
North Wales Branches
ScotRail Central
ScotRail East
Sussex Coast
Transpennine
West Coast
(b) Reliability
Anglia Locals
Avon
Cardiff Valleys
Central Inter Urban
Cornwall
Cumbria
East Midlands and Lincs
Great Northern
Lancashire Local
LTS Rail
Manchester Local
Manchester Long
Merseyrail City Line
Mid Wales and Marches
Northampton Lines
Northern Long
Northern Short
North London Lines
North Wales Branches
North Wales Inter Urban
South Cotswolds
South Yorkshire and Humberside Long
South Yorkshire and Humberside Short
Thameslink
Transpennine
West and Central Wales
West Yorkshire Long
West Yorkshire Short
Western Inter Urban
(ii) 52 weeks ending 26 March 1996
(a) Punctuality
Anglia Intercity
Avon
Central Inter Urban
Cross Country
East Coast
East Suffolk
Felixstowe
Gatwick Express
Great Northern
Great Western
Kent Link
Lancashire Local
Manchester Local
Northampton Lines
North London Orbital
North Wales Branches
Peterborough/Cambridge
South West Main Line
Sussex Coast
Thameslink
Transpennine
West Coast
Western Inter Urban
(b) Reliability
Avon
Cardiff Railway Co. Ltd.
Cornwall
Cumbria
Devon
East Coast
Felixstowe
Great Northern
Lancashire Local
Manchester Local
Manchester Long
Merseyrail City Line
Northern Long
Northern Short
North London Orbital
North Wales Branches
North Wales Inter Urban
South Yorkshire and Humberside Short
Thames
Thameslink
Transpennine
West and Central Wales
West Coast
Western Inter Urban

Note:

On 1 April 1995, North London Lines was disaggregated into North London Orbital and Watford Locals route groups. Anglia Locals was disaggregated into East Suffolk, Felixstow, Great Yarmouth, Lowestoft, Peterborough/Cambridge and Sheringham route groups.

Marine Accidents Investigation Branch

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what regulations existed before 1994 concerning the requirement of the MAIB to consult individuals or organisations that were subject to potential criticism in MAIB reports. [28861]

Mr. Norris: Prior to 1994, section 9(4) of the Merchant Shipping (Accident Investigation) Regulations 1989 met this requirement.

Oil Spillage (Sea Empress Incident)

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what information has been requested by the Environment Agency from his Department about the Sea Empress oil spillage; when that information was requested; and if he will place a copy of his Department's reply in the Library. [28860]

Mr. Norris: There have been close contacts between the Environment Agency and my Department on a range of matters associated with the Sea Empress oil spillage.

It is not usual practice to place copies of correspondence between the Environment Agency and my Department in the Library.

Concessionary Travel

Mr. Foulkes: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans he has to amend the London Regional Transport Act 1984 and the Transport Act 1985 to include men aged 60 years or over as a further eligible class of person for transport concessions as a result of the Atkins *v.* Wrekin district council and Department of Transport case considered by the European Court. [28986]

Mr. Norris: The European Court of Justice has not yet given its judgment in the Atkins case. When it does, we shall consider any implications for the current legislation.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Pre-School Voucher Scheme

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what qualifications will be demanded of those responsible for organising the provision of pre-school provision under the proposed voucher scheme. [28731]

Mr. Ancram: The consultation document "Pre School Education: The Voucher Scheme in Northern Ireland" describes the qualifications which the Government propose to require in respect of staff employed by providers under the scheme. These are:

Grant-aided nursery schools/classes: teachers(s) with qualified teacher status and qualified nursery assistant(s).

Reception classes in primary schools: qualified teachers and a classroom assistant.

All other settings: at least half of the staff must hold a relevant qualification in day-care or education.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what provision he has made for increased capital expenditure for the education and library boards to respond to his voucher scheme for pre-school children. [28733]

Mr. Ancram: No additional capital resources will be made available under the pre-school voucher scheme itself but education and library boards will be able to apply for assistance to meet the capital costs of additional nursery provision from the special support programme for peace and reconciliation. It will in the first instance be a matter for them to determine their own capital priorities in response to the scheme.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what provisions exist to cancel the contract to be issued to a pre-school voucher company without cost to public funds; and if he will make a statement. [28735]

Mr. Ancram: No contract has yet been drawn up between the Department of Education Northern Ireland and any company in respect of the pre-school voucher scheme.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if providers of pre-five activity under the proposed voucher scheme will be required to meet current standards required in terms of staff qualifications and health and safety standards in nursery education; and if he will list all differences in requirements. [28730]

Mr. Ancram: Providers of pre-school education will be required to meet different requirements in respect of qualifications, depending on the type of provision which they make. The different requirements proposed are set out in the consultative document which I have recently issued on the pre-school voucher scheme. All providers will be subject to the requirements of the Health and Safety at Work (NI) Order 1978.

Nursery Education

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the differences in requirements for accommodation for nursery education *(a)* conforming to Department of Education standards, and *(b)* proposed in draft regulations and guidance on family support, child minding and day care as required in the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. [28732]

Mr. Ancram: I will write to the hon. Member and place a copy of the letter in the Library of the House.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the current average cost in Northern Ireland of providing a full-time nursery education place. [28734]

Mr. Ancram: Information in the exact form requested is not readily available because it is difficult to identify separately the costs associated with nursery classes in primary schools. However, the average recurrent cost of a full-time nursery place in a nursery school based on Education and library boards' planned expenditure for 1996–97 is £2,130.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Motability

Mr. Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of whether the financial reserves of Motability Finance Ltd. are being fully used to the benefit of its customers. [27716]

Mr. Burt: Financial reserves are maintained by Motability Finance Ltd. as a normal business measure to safeguard the operation of the Motability schemes.

Child Support

Sir David Steel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will include costs of family travel in remote rural areas as essential living costs to be assessed by the Child Support Agency. [28104]

Mr. Andrew Mitchell: A broad-bush allowance for high travel-to-work costs is already included in the child support formula and the departures scheme, which is currently being piloted with a view to its introduction later this year, will provide the flexibility for this to be varied where it does not fully meet individual circumstances. The new scheme will also take account of high travel costs for absent parents, necessary to enable them to maintain contact with their children.

The child support maintenance requirement is intended to cover the basic day-to-day needs of the children for whom an assessment is due. This is based on income support levels which apply nationally and it would not be appropriate to vary the amounts involved.

Family Credit

Mr. Ian McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list, by region, for 1995–96 *(a)* the total amount paid out in family credit, *(b)* the number of family credit recipients, *(c)* the average number of child dependants of each recipient and *(d)* the average weekly amount paid out to each recipient. [28223]

Mr. Roger Evans: The available information is set out in the table.

	Total amount of family credit paid 1995–96 £ million	*Number of recipients*	*Average number of children*	*Average weekly family credit £*
Northern				
Eastern	313	114,000	2.0	52.40
Midlands	308	115,000	2.1	51.05
London North	199	76,000	2.1	50.10
London South	171	66,000	2.1	49.53
Wales and South Western	233	87,000	2.0	50.84
North Western	276	100,000	2.0	52.54
Scotland	182	70,000	1.9	49.52
Total for Great Britain	1,682	627,000	2.0	51.06

Notes:
1. The expenditure figures have been derived by apportioning the estimate of total family credit expenditure published in the 1995–96 departmental report, and must therefore be treated with caution.
2. Numbers are rounded to the nearest thousand.
3. Regions used are Department of Social Security administrative regions.
4. The number of recipients are for families in receipt of family credit at July 1995, this being the most recent information currently available.

Source:
Family credit 5 per cent. sample of awards.

Suspension of Benefits

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what statutory powers he has under social security regulations to suspend or amend the payments of benefits awarded to claimants. [28629]

Mr. Roger Evans: Payment of an award of benefit made by the independent adjudicating authorities may be suspended or withheld, in whole or in part, by the Secretary of State for Social Security under the provisions of regulations 37, 37A or 37AA of the Social Security (Claims and Payments) Regulations 1987. The Secretary of State has no other powers which enable him to amend an award of benefit, however independent adjudication officers do have a power to review an award.

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security on how many occasions he has used powers to suspend or amend payments of benefits to claimants already in receipt of them; how many applicants were affected by these changes; and what was the total amount that these actions saved his Department in the payment of benefits in each of the last three years. [28631]

Mr. Evans: The information is not available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Child Support Agency

Ms Lynne: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many official complaints have been received by the Child Support Agency in each month since the agency started to operate. [28056]

Mr. Andrew Mitchell: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the chief executive, Miss Ann Chant. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Ann Chant to Ms Liz Lynne, dated 9 May 1996.

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Social Security as to the number of official complaints received by the Child Support Agency.

We have not separately identified 'official' complaints to the Agency, but have taken the broadest view as to what constitutes a complaint whether it be against the policy, the administration or some other aspect of Child Support legislation.'

So what we record as complaints will cover things like policy issues; concerns about the imposition of deduction from earnings orders; the level of assessed maintenance; requests for assessments to be rechecked; the time taken to process a case; general administrative concerns and suggestions that the other client's affairs have not been properly taken into account. We also include complaints and queries from people who are not clients of the Agency.

The table attached shows a monthly breakdown of all such complaints received in 1994/95 and 1995/96; we did not keep monthly totals in 1993/94.

I hope this is helpful.

Number of complaints received by Child Support Agency

	Number
1993–94	10,886
1994–95	
April	1,465
May	1,984
June	1,881
July	1,992
August	1,131
September	2,536
October	2,579
November	3,070
December	2,458
January	1,483
February	3,121
March	3,948
1995–96	
April	3,025
May	2,501
June	3,113
July	2,281
August	3,160
September	2,645
October	3,004
November	2,813
December	1,792
January	1,922
February	2,373
March	1,962

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Competitiveness

Mr. Alfred Morris: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what assessment he has made of the competitiveness of the United Kingdom economy relative to *(a)* other EU states and *(b)* the rest of the world. [28342]

The Deputy Prime Minister: The Government's plans for improving the competitiveness of the United Kingdom were set out in the 1994 and 1995 White Papers on competitiveness. Progress on those plans will be reported in a third Competitiveness White Paper in the summer.

The UK has had the strongest recovery since 1992 of any major EU country. Over the last international cycle, 1982 to 1993, Japan was the only G7 country to outpace the UK in terms of gross domestic product per capita growth. The UK significantly outpaced France, Italy, Canada and the European average.

HEALTH

Midwives

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to hold an inquiry into the reasons for the acute shortage of midwives in the South Thames area; and if he will make a statement. [28262]

Mr. Malone: None. This is a matter for local employers who since 1992 have been responsible for planning and training the number of midwives they need. The Inner London Education Consortium has increased the number of commissions for registered midwifery training by 35 per cent.

Mental Health (Prescription Charges)

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what plans he has to extend the list of eligible people with mental illnesses exempt from paying for prescribed treatment; and if he will make a statement; [28200]

(2) what representations he has received from *(a)* organisations and *(b)* individuals about the extra financial costs imposed by prescription charges on people suffering from mental illnesses; [28202]

(3) what plans he has to introduce free medication for people with mental illnesses who are treated in the community; and if he will make a statement. [28201]

Mr. Malone: None. Many people who are mentally ill benefit from our extensive exemption arrangements, which are among the most generous in Europe. In 1996–97 we expect 85 per cent. of prescriptions to be dispensed free.

We receive approximately two letters per month on this subject, mainly from individuals.

Alzheimer's Disease

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much cash has been spent on Alzheimer's disease research by his Department in each year since 1989; and if he will make a statement. [28212]

Mr. Bowis: The main agency through which the Government support bio-medical and clinical research is the Medical Research Council which receives its grant-in-aid from the office of my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade. My Department's policy research programme is contributing £750,000 to the MRC cognitive and ageing study between October 1990 and June 1996. Another study, "Husbands and wives who care for elderly people with dementia and functional psychiatric disorder", was undertaken at the Institute of Psychiatry and ended in December 1995; the total cost was £134,331.

Private Finance Initiative

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the pay-back period under the proposed PFI contracts for new hospitals at *(a)* Norwich, *(b)* Swindon and *(c)* Royal London. [28348]

Mr. Horam: The national health service trusts are currently negotiating their private finance initiative contracts with private sector partners or potential private sector partners. The dates of the payments under the contracts are part of these negotiations.

Oral Contraceptives

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations the Medicines Commission has received relating to oral contraceptives containing desogestrel and gestodene; and what response the commission has made to those representations. [28136]

Mr. Malone: The chairman of the Medicines Commission has received requests from one individual for the commission to examine issues relating to these oral contraceptives. The chairman responded that it was not appropriate at this time for the commission to consider the matter.

Mr. Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Bradford, West (Mr. Madden) of 2 April, *Official Report*, column *186*, what steps the Medicines Control Agency and the Committee on Safety of Medicines took to exclude a false low estimate of the risk of venous thromboembolism with oral contraceptives containing levonorgestrel. [28289]

Mr. Malone: Recent studies have indicated that oral contraceptives containing desogestrel or gestodene are associated with greater risk of venous thromboembolism than oral contraceptives containing levonorgestrel. A number of factors, including various forms of bias, confounding and chance can potentially influence the findings of such studies, leading to estimates of risk being falsely high or low. The Medicines Control Agency and Committee on Safety of Medicines carefully considered detailed analyses examining the possible effects of these factors and concluded that the observed differences in risk could not be fully explained by them.

Medicines (Safety)

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the occasions during 1994 on which *(a)* the Licensing Authority, *(b)* the Medicine Control Agency and *(c)* the Committee on Safety of Medicines have taken legal action with respect to matters relating to

the Medicines Act 1968; and how many injunctions have been sought during that period relating to material relating to the efficacy or safety of medicines. [28137]

Mr. Malone: A list of those occasions will be placed in the Library.

One injunction was sought with the consent of the Attorney-General and granted in 1994: to stop the illegal promotion and sale of gamma hydroxybutyrate, an unlicensed medical product known to be used as a drug of abuse.

Mr. Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list for each occasion that the chairman of the Committee on Safety of Medicines has sent "Dear Doctor" letters to United Kingdom doctors, what regulatory action accompanied the letter, the date of the letter and the date of the licensing action. [28139]

Mr. Malone: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 9 May. The "Dear doctor" letters sent out by the chairman of the Committee on Safety of Medicines prior to 1980 are shown in the table.

Subject	*Date of letter*	*Products containing the following drug substance(s)*
Establishment of the Committee on Dental and Surgical Materials—advice on reporting of adverse reactions	23 January 1979	No safety issue
Mortality among women using oral contraceptives	6 October 1977	Combined oral contraceptives
Phenformin and lactic acidosis	7 September 1977	Phenformin
Sub-acute myelo-optic neuropathy with clioquinol;	May 1973	Clioquinol
Vaginal adenocarcinoma with stilboestrol;	May 1973	Stilboestrol
Safety of local anaesthetics containing noradrenaline, use in patients on antidepressants;	May 1973	Local anaesthetics (preparations containing 1:25,000 noradrenaline), Tricyclic antidepressants
Anticonvulsants and congenital abnormalities	May 1973	Anticonvulsants including primidone, phenobarbitone and phenytoin
Combined oral contraceptives and pulmonary embolism	May 1973	Oral contraceptives (>50 micrograms oestrogen)

Medicines Act 1968

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 2 April, *Official Report*, column *186*, if he will list for each of the 35 occasions in 1995 when the Licensing Authority instigated legal action, whom the legal action was taken against, what was the relevant statutory provision, what the outcome of the action was and what costs were incurred by the Licensing Authority. [28138]

Mr. Malone: A list of those occasions will be placed in the Library.

The relevant statutory provisions were sections 108(1), 67 and 45 of the Medicines Act 1968. It was not the practice in 1995 to apportion costs of enforcement action to each individual defendant.

Medicines Commission

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health who employs the legal advisers of the Medicines Commission; and what is their relationship with (i) the Licensing Authority, (ii) the Department of Health and (iii) the Medicines Control Agency. [28140]

Mr. Malone: The Medicines Commission has access, on request, to legal advice from the office of the solicitor to the Department of Social Security in respect of medicines for human use and to the office of the legal adviser and solicitor to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in respect of veterinary products. The Department of Health and the Medicines Control Agency, who act on the Licensing Authority's behalf, receive legal advice from the office of the solicitor to the Department of Social Security.

Sheffield Centre for Health and Related Research

Mr. Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) pursuant to his answer of 26 April, *Official Report*, column *293*, if he will list the staff employed by the Sheffield centre for health and related research who are former employees of the Trent regional health authority; and if he will make a statement on the academic research experience of the staff, their salary levels and which bodies are responsible for paying these salaries; [28343]

(2) pursuant to his answer of 26 April, *Official Report*, column *293*, what was the position of the three staff formerly employed at Trent regional health authority who took up posts at the Sheffield centre for health and related research held at the regional health authority; and what severance terms were agreed by the regional health authority. [28420]

Mr. Malone: These are matters for the University of Sheffield. The three staff resigned from the Trent regional health authority and no severance terms were agreed. As to their positions, I refer the hon. Member to the reply that I gave him on 26 April at column *293*.

Mr. Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what funding was provided by the former Yorkshire regional health authority to the Sheffield centre for health and related research. [28353]

Mr. Malone: None.

Redundancies

Mr. Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 16 April, *Official Report*,

column 477, what exceptions were made in providing redundancy terms more favourable than those listed in section 45 of the general Whitley council handbook or circular HSG (94) 18, following the dissolution of the former Yorkshire regional health authority; if he will indicate in each case the circumstances in which this was done; and by how much the terms agreed exceeded those set out in the guidance. [28352]

Mr. Malone: No exceptions were made.

Mr. Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the total sum currently being made available *(a)* through the national health service executive and *(b)* direct from the Department of Health to the Sheffield centre for Health and related research in 1996–97. [28354]

Mr. Malone: The total value in 1996–97 of contracts awarded to the Sheffield centre for health and related research is £965,660 by the national health service executive and £555,390 by the Department of Health.

Mr. Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list the staff employed by the Sheffield centre for health and related research who are former employees of the Yorkshire regional health authority; and if he will make a statement on the academic research experience of the staff indicating their salary levels and the bodies responsible for their pay; [28419]

(2) which staff from the former Yorkshire regional health authority (i) transferred to take up posts at the Sheffield centre for health and related research and (ii) took up posts at that centre following the dissolution of the regional health authority; what was their former position at the regional health authority; and what were the severance terms agreed by the regional health authority. [28421]

Mr. Malone: These are matters for the University of Sheffield.

Psychiatrists

Mr. Meale: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the current numbers of consultant psychiatrist posts in England and Wales by local health authority area. [28875]

Mr. Malone: The available information is shown in the table.

Consultants in the psychiatric group by region as at 30 September 1994

Whole Time Equivalents

	Number
England and Wales total	1,990
Northern	100
Yorkshire	130
Trent	180
East Anglia	90
North West Thames	130
North East Thames	160
South East Thames	180
South West Thames	130
Wessex	110
Oxford	110
South Western	120
West Midlands	180
Mersey	90
North Western	140
Special Health Authorities	30
Wales	110

Figures are rounded to the nearest 10.

It is standard practice not to show statistical data relating to NHS staff in such detail that individuals could be identified.

Mr. Meale: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many health trusts and health authorities by region do not utilise psychiatrists in planning services for the mentally ill. [28867]

Mr. Bowis: This information is not available centrally.

Mr. Meale: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many vacancies there are for consultant psychiatrists in each health authority area in the UK. [28876]

Mr. Malone: Figures for England are shown in the table. Questions relating to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are matters for my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Wales and for Scotland and my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Consultant vacancies in the psychiatry group as at 30 September 1994 by region

Whole time equivalents

	Number
England total	170
Northern	10
Yorkshire	10
Trent	20
East Anglia	10
NW Thames	20
NE Thames	10
SE Thames	10
SW Thames	20
Wessex	0
Oxford	0
S Western	0
W Midlands	30
Mersey	10
N Western	10
Special Health Authorities	0

Figures are rounded to the nearest 10. Numbers greater than zero but less than or equal to 5 are shown as zero.

It is standard practice not to show statistical data relating to NHS staff in such detail that individuals could be identified.

Mr. Meale: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many psychiatric posts are currently occupied by locums in each health authority area in the UK. [28877]

Mr. Malone: This information is not available centrally.

Read Codes System

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 2 May, *Official Report*, column *608*, what estimate he has made of the number of *(a)* hospitals and *(b)* general practice doctors who have participated in the development of the Read codes system; what financial value he has placed on their time in evaluating the costs and benefits of continuing public investment in the Read codes system; and if he will make a statement. [28934]

Mr. Horam: The clinical terms projects involved approximately 2,000 clinicians including 72 general practitioners. Individual hospitals were not represented.

The clinicians were associated with 55 working groups. The chairman of each group received a small honorarium and members were re-imbursed travel expenses for attendance at meetings.

No estimate was made of the financial value of the time that each clinician spent on the project.

With regard to an evaluation of the Read codes I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 2 May at column *608*.

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 2 May, *Official Report*, column *608*, what was the total licence income accruing for all NHS sources to Computer Aided Medicine Systems Ltd. in each financial year since 1991–92; and on what occasion the appropriate risk-rewards ratio pertaining to this licence income was last independently evaluated. [28938]

Mr. Horam: The following are the revenues for national health service licences paid to Computer Aided Medical Systems Ltd. in each financial year since 1991:

	£
April 1991 to 30 September 1992 (18 months)	1,530,900
1 October 1992 to 30 September 1993	1,286,912
1 October 1993 to 30 September 1994	1,572,877
1 October 1994 to 30 September 1995	1,684,016

All the company's accounts and business practices have been audited and accepted for each year up to 30 September 1994.

The annual audit for 1994–95 accounts began on 20 April 1996, and the report is awaited from the auditors with completion scheduled for the end of May 1996.

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 2 May, *Official Report*, column *607*, if he will list those elements of the Read codes 3 system which will reach service strength in *(a)* 1996, *(b)* 1997, *(c)* 1998, *(d)* 1999 and *(e)* 2000. [28937]

Mr. Horam: The time scale for key elements of Read codes version 3 to reach service level strength is as follows:

1996

A product to support the business requirements of hospitals including disorders, procedures, signs and symptoms which describes the work of hospital doctors and is to be used by doctors and coders within hospitals to enable the production of discharge summaries, statutory data sets and reports.

1997

A product including additional terms and qualifiers to support the needs of general practioners and doctors in acute trusts for more detailed electronic clinical records.

Work will take place in 1997 to pilot exchange of clinical messages between and within the various healthcare sectors.

1998 onwards

The nature of the further refinement and development of version 3 will depend on the feedback from users.

Health Services

Mr. Meale: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will issue guidelines to helath authorities and health trusts requiring them to involve local health professionals in the planning of health services in their areas; [28874]

(2) if he will issue guidelines to health authorities and trusts requiring them to obtain the advice of *(a)* psychiatrists and *(b)* other health professionals practising locally in the NHS when developing strategic plans for mental health. [28873]

Mr. Malone: Health authorities are responsible for developing local health service strategies in partnership with primary care, local trusts and other agencies and are legally required to take appropriate professional advice in carrying out their functions. This is set out in EL(94)79 and HSG(95)11, copies of which are available in the Library.

Cancelled Operations

Mr. Milburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 7 March, *Official Report*, column *324*, if he will now provide comparable information on cancelled operations during the fourth quarter of 1995–96. [28939]

Mr. Horam: The information will be placed in the Library.

The national health service carries out some 5.5 million operations annually. Less than 1 per cent. are cancelled on the day the patient is due to arrive, or after arrival, in hospital, and 89 per cent. of patients whose operations are cancelled are readmitted within one month.

NHS Trusts

Mr. Milburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what information his Department collates on trusts which have established limited companies. [28723]

Mr. Horam: None.

Mental Handicap Hospitals

Mr. Milburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many mental handicap hospitals there were in each district health authority for each year since 1979; and how many have gained trust status. [28724]

Mr. Bowis: Information is not available centrally in the form requested. The number of trusts and directly managed units with learning disability beds, by region, in 1994–95 is shown in the table.

	Number of trusts	*Number of DMUs*
Northern and Yorkshire	19	0
Trent	11	1
Anglia and Oxford	13	0
North Thames	11	2
South Thames	18	3
South West	15	0
West Midlands	12	1
North West	15	0

Further detail on the number of beds is available in "Bed Availability for England", copies of which are available in the Library.

TREASURY

Office Space

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the square footage and cost of office space rented by his Department and its agencies and the number of his Department or agencies' buildings partly or fully unoccupied, together with the square footage of that unoccupied office space and its estimated rental value where available in each of the past five financial years. [27735]

Mrs. Angela Knight: The properties occupied by the Inland Revenue, HM Customs and Excise and the Office for National Statistics—formerly central statistical office-Paymaster, Valuation Office and the Royal Mint formed part of the Government common user office estate which, prior to 1 April 1996, was managed by Property Holdings. From that date Departments took over responsibility from Property Holdings when they became fully accountable for their own accommodation. Information relating to vacant CUE space for the years in question was given by my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment on 30 January, *Official Report*, columns *648–49*.

Not all the information requested on occupation and cost of office space is available. However, for those Departments and agencies in respect of which information is held, the total square footage and cost of office space rented for the five years in question were:

Year	*Square feet*	*Cost £*
1991–92[1]	41,368	557,296
1992–93	2,678,800	28,365,826
1993–94	2,602,795	29,394,490
1994–95	2,577,414	27,940,773
1995–96	2,520,690	27,497,485

[1] Excluding Customs and Excise.

European Union

Mr. David Shaw: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate of the number of jobs lost to the United Kingdom economy as a direct result of the annual net contributions to the European Union made since 1973. [27940]

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: The direct employment effects of the United Kingdom's net contributions to the European Union could not be calculated without making assumptions about how the money might otherwise have been spent or used to reduce taxes.

Pre-tax Incomes

Mr. Timms: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will update the answer to the hon. Member for Taunton (Mr. Nicholson) of 20 December 1994, *Official Report*, column *1080*, for 1993–94, 1994–95, 1995–96 and 1996–97, giving his answer at 1996–97 prices. [28583]

Mr. Jack: The table provides estimates based on the survey of personal incomes of numbers of individuals for 1993–94, the latest year for which information is available at such high levels of income, 1983–84 and 1973–74.

Pre-tax income range (adjusted for changes in average male earnings)

Thousands

	£200,000–£400,000	*£400,000+*
1993–94	18	7
1983–84	7	1
1973–74	12	3

The income ranges used for 1983–84 and 1973–74 have been adjusted to take account of changes in average adult male earnings up to 1993–94.

Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy

Mr. Alan W. Williams: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the cost to public finance from the BSE situation of *(a)* compensation to farmers, abattoirs and meat processing companies and *(b)* indirect losses from reduced tax revenue and employment in ancillary industries. [28520]

Mr. Waldegrave: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend, the Member for Northampton, North (Mr. Marlow) on 26 April, *Official Report*, columns *321–22*.

The indirect effects on Government tax revenues will depend upon both the length of time that output in ancillary industries is reduced, and the extent to which lower output and employment in the ancillary industries is offset by higher output and employment elsewhere in the economy. It is impossible to estimate these effects with any precision.

Bristol and West Building Society

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received concerning the proposed takeover of the Bristol and West building society. [28464]

Mrs. Angela Knight: None.

Government Deficit

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of the general Government financial deficit in 1996–97; and what was the outturn in 1995–96. [28890]

Mr. Waldegrave: The Budget forecast of the general Government financial deficit in 1996–97 was £26 billion, equivalent to 3½ per cent. of gross domestic product. An updated forecast will be published in the summer economic forecast on 9 July.

An outturn estimate of the GGFD in 1995–96 is not yet available.

EU Directives

Mr. Steen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the directives which have affected his Department in each of the past three years and *(a)* the United Kingdom legislation introduced as a result of the directives, *(b)* the United Kingdom legislation which goes beyond the minimum standards set out in the directives and *(c)* the clauses within each piece of United Kingdom legislation which amplify the minimum standards set out in the directives. [27086]

Mr. Jack *[holding answer 29 April 1996]:* This information is not currently available, and could not be obtained without incurring disproportionate cost.

EU Budget Fraud

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what treaty changes the Government are proposing to the current intergovernmental conference to combat fraud and financial mismanagement of EU funds. [27191]

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory *[holding answer 8 May 1996]:* As stated in "A partnership of Nations", the Government made significant progress at Maastricht in obtaining treaty changes to combat fraud and improving financial management. The Government believe that the Community should make better use of the existing provisions, but would naturally support any effective proposals to strengthen these.

Employees' Rights

Ms Jowell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what provision is available to employees of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [27594]

Mrs. Angela Knight *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* The information requested is as follows for the Treasury, Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise.

HM TREASURY

(a) Maternity leave

(b) Maternity pay

The Treasury gives three months and one week's paid maternity leave to a pregnant member of staff for the period of continuous absence before and after confinement provided that she (i) states that she intends to return to work in the Treasury after her confinement, and that she agrees to repay any payment made during that period if she fails to return—such repayment will exclude any statutory maternity pay to which there is entitled—(ii) is in paid service with the Treasury at the time her maternity leave begins and has rendered at least one year's such service, (iii) is not employed on a casual appointment, and (iv) is not employed on a fixed term appointment of less than two years.

Women who have not completed one year's service or who are employed for a period of less than two years are not entitled to contractual maternity pay, but may be able to receive statutory maternity pay or maternity allowance.

A woman who qualifies for paid maternity leave will also qualify for a period of unpaid maternity leave. The total period of paid and unpaid maternity leave may not exceed 52 weeks.

(c) Paternity leave

Fathers are entitled to take two days paid paternity leave.

(d) Parental leave

Staff entering into adoption procedures may be granted up to 20 working days paid special leave.

(e) Flexible working hours

Flexible working hours are widely available in the Treasury to staff in pay range E and below. Participation is dependent on agreement between staff and managers in individual teams.

(f) Part-time working

(g) Job Sharing

(i) Home working

(j) Term-time contracts

Treasury staff can adopt alternative working patterns such as part-time working, job sharing, home-working and term-time working. Due to the nature of Treasury business, not all posts can be adapted to every alternative working pattern. Where adaptation is possible line managers are encouraged to make alternative working patterns available.

(h) Leave to care for sick children

Up to 10 days in any one leave year paid special leave may be granted for reasons of grave concern to the member of staff which can be dealt with only by him or her in person, for example, acute domestic difficulties such as care of a sick close relative or child.

(k) Annual hours contracts

The Treasury does not offer annual hours contracts.

(l) Workplace nurseries

The Treasury does not offer a workplace nursery, but does offer subsidised places in the Westminster holiday play scheme.

(m) Childcare allowances

Staff who are required to work extra hours or work outside their normal working pattern are entitled to claim reimbursement for additional child care costs.

(n) Carers' leave

This is covered by (h).

(o) Career break schemes

A career break of up to five years unpaid special leave may be allowed to staff with unavoidable domestic commitments or other exceptional circumstances. The scheme is open to all staff with a satisfactory attendance, performance and conduct record.

INLAND REVENUE

(a) Maternity Leave

(b) Maternity pay

The Inland Revenue gives three months and one week's paid maternity leave to a pregnant member of staff for the period of continuous absence before and after confinement provided

that she (i) states that she intends to return to work in the Inland Revenue after her confinement, and that she agrees to repay any payment made during that period if she fails to return (such repayment will exclude any statutory maternity pay to which there is entitlement), (ii) is in paid service with the Inland Revenue at the time her maternity leave begins and has rendered at least one year's such service, (iii) is not employed on a casual appointment, and (iv) is not employed on a fixed term appointment of less than two years.

Women who have not completed one year's service or who are employed for a period of less than two years are not entitled to contractual maternity pay, but may be able to receive statutory maternity pay or maternity allowance.

A woman who qualifies for paid maternity leave will also qualify for a period of unpaid maternity leave. The total period of paid and unpaid maternity leave may not exceed 52 weeks.

(c) Paternity leave

Men are entitled to two days paid paternity leave.

(d) Parental leave

The Revenue has no special arrangements for parental leave. But it recognises that people have family responsibilities, and allows paid time off for short-term emergencies or, for long-term needs, time off without pay and full employment rights on return to work.

(e) Flexible working hours

Flexible working hours are offered wherever possible and are worked in most Revenue offices, but availability is always subject to the needs of the job, and people can always choose to revert to a standard day if they wish. Each office adapts a centrally agreed scheme to its needs in consultation with its staff.

(f) Part-time working

Inland Revenue employees have been able to work part-time since 1985. The Revenue tries to meet individual needs but requests are considered in the light of the work of the office, service to taxpayers and the effect on other staff. On average, 15 per cent. of Revenue employees work part time at any one time.

(g) Job sharing

Staff can work part time on a job-sharing basis. As with part-time working, the aim is for flexibility to provide benefits for individuals and the department; jobs can be shared by two or more people sharing one or more full-time jobs.

(h) Care for sick children

If someone needs to care for their children or spouse or partner's children when alternative arrangements have fallen through or could not be made at short notice, the Inland Revenue will give up to five days special leave with pay to cover the emergency.

(i) Home working

There is currently no general provision for home working in the Inland Revenue but pilot experiments are under way to establish whether working at or from home on a voluntary basis will provide benefits for the department and individual employees, taking account in particular of the wider implications, such as security.

(j) Term-time contracts

There is a provision for Inland Revenue employees to work full or part-time hours during school terms but be absent during all or some of the school holidays. Arrangements for each year are agreed in advance and, if they choose, employees can plan to use some of their annual leave allowance to reduce the loss in pay.

(k) Annual hours contracts

The Inland Revenue does not offer annual hours contracts.

(l) Workplace nurseries

Inland Revenue employees have access to 15 nurseries through the workplace.

(m) Child care allowances

If a parent has to attend a training course which affects their normal working hours, the Revenue meets the cost of any additional child care expenses.

(n) Carers' leave

This is covered by career breaks.

(o) Career breaks

Career breaks are open to men and women in order to look after someone close to them such as children or elderly relatives. An employee would be eligible if they had completed probation and established a good record for health, attendance and performance. At the end of the career break the person concerned resumes the same employment rights as other employees.

The maximum absence is five years. If the initial arrangement was for less, an extension up to the maximum may be allowed, or a person may opt to come back sooner.

CUSTOMS AND EXCISE

(a) Maternity leave

(b) Maternity pay

Customs and Excise gives three months and one week's paid maternity leave to a pregnant member of staff for the period of continuous absence before and after confinement provided that she (i) states that she intends to return to work in Customs and Excise after her confinement, and that she agrees to repay any payment made during that period if she fails to return (such repayment will exclude any statutory maternity pay to which there is entitlement), (ii) is in paid service with Customs and Excise at the time her maternity leave begins and has rendered at least one year's such service, (iii) is not employed on a casual appointment, and (iv) is not employed on a casual appointment, and (iv) is not employed on a fixed term appointment of less than two years.

Women who have not completed one year's service or who are employed for a period of less than two years are not entitled to contractual maternity pay, but may be able to receive statutory maternity pay or maternity allowance.

A woman who qualifies for paid maternity leave will also qualify for a period of unpaid maternity leave. The total period of paid and unpaid maternity leave may not exceed 52 weeks.

Paternity leave

Fathers are entitled to two days paid paternity leave per confinement. Staff who are temporarily appointed for a period of less than two years are excluded from this arrangement.

(d) Parental leave

Line managers are encouraged to grant staff special leave without pay to either parent to help them to care for their children whilst enabling them to pursue their careers.

(e) Flexible working hours

(f) Part-time working

(g) Job sharing

(j) Term-time contracts

Customs and Excise uses flexible working hours, part-time work, job sharing and term-time contracts. Applications are considered on their merits by local management, taking into account all individual circumstances and the business needs of the department.

(h) Leave to care for sick children

Parents of children who are ill can apply to their line manager for special leave. Alternatively parents can take annual leave, flexi-leave etc. Managers are encouraged to treat these applications sympathetically as they are applications for parental leave under (d) above.

(i) Home-working

At present the department acknowledges a difference between staff who work from home and those who are home workers. Working from home is an informal arrangement, typically for staff who are VAT visiting officers.

A small number of staff are officially designated as home-workers with the department providing telephones, fax machines etc., based in the officers' homes and paying a portion of their utility bills etc. The department will, this financial year, be undertaking a review of the arrangements for officers who use their homes as a base for their work.

(k) Annual hours contracts

Managers in certain operational areas of the Department have discretion to introduce an annual hours working scheme where there is a need for additional hours, weekend or shift working. The scheme is a management tool however rather than a voluntary arrangement for which individuals can state a preference.

(l) Workplace nurseries

Customs and Excise has five workplace nurseries accommodating 155 children. The department also buys places in 20 other Crown and privately owned nurseries nationwide accommodating a further 120 children. Nursery places are available subject to a satisfactory staff needs analysis and value for money business case. All members of staff are eligible to use the nurseries.

(m) Child care allowances

If the normal working pattern is temporarily disrupted, and additional child care costs are incurred, staff can claim help with those expenses. From 1 April 1996, this concession was extended to cover additional adult care costs for dependent relatives, in exceptional circumstances, and where the officer is the primary carer. The purpose of the concession is to help staff with short-term additional costs when the normal working pattern is temporarily disrupted.

Claims are limited to no more than three weeks on a continuous basis or a total of no more than five weeks per year.

(n) Carers' leave

Line managers can agree to special leave with or without pay for a variety of reasons including in order to care for sick relatives. Special leave is discretionary, but managers are encouraged to treat applications sympathetically. Staff who may have long-term caring responsibilities can apply for a career break.

(o) Career break schemes

The career break scheme is a form of special leave without pay aimed at staff who want a long break from work—up to five years, or longer if necessary—yet be able to return to their career again. It can be granted for a variety of reasons such as child care, full-time study or caring for sick relatives etc. The scheme is open to all staff who have completed their probation and who have a satisfactory performance and conduct record.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

British Academy of Sport

Mr. Pendry: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage how many of the responses which the Sports Council received in his consultation process on the British academy of sport supported (1) core funding of the academy by commercial interests; and how many did not; [27260]

(2) the idea that the academy should have a role in setting and assuring standards for facilities that are currently available; and how many did not; [27256]

(3) a selection of sports it chooses to help; [27252]

(4) its location at a greenfield site; how many supported a brownfield site; and how many favoured a combination of the two; [27254]

(5) the location of national training facilities for their specific sport at the headquarters site; and how many did not; [27250]

(6) a management team involving commercial interests to run the academy; and how many did not; [27253]

(7) the provision of generic sports services at the headquarters site; and how many did not; [27251]

(8) when the Government will publish their proposals on the planned British academy of sport; [27259]

(9) how many responses the Sports Council received in its consultation process on the British academy of sport; how many of these supported its location at a single large site; how many supported an enhanced network of services throughout the United Kingdom; and how many supported a combination of the two. [27255]

Mr. Sproat: Following the publication last July of the sports policy document, "Raising the Game", which first put forward proposals for the British academy of sport and an associated network of local sports institutions, the Sports Council consulted widely on how best to carry forward the proposals. The consultations have now been completed. The Government's proposals for a British academy of sport as the pinnacle of a network of regional centres of sporting excellence and sports-specific academies, was widely welcomed in the consultation. Details of the proposals will be set out in the bid prospectus, which is now being prepared with the Sports Council. The prospectus will be published shortly.

The findings of the consultation form an important part of the development of the policy and the preparation of the bid prospectus. A summary of the main conclusions will be published with the bid prospectus.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Nuclear Power

Mr. Whittingdale: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on the financial position of British Energy, and on the financial and commercial position of Magnox Electric, following the restructuring of Nuclear Electric on 31 March. [29058]

Mr. Eggar: On 31 March 1996, Nuclear Electric plc and Scottish Nuclear Ltd. were restructured to form one group of companies which owns the advanced gas-cooled reactor/pressurised water reactor stations and their associated assets and liabilities—British Energy plc and its subsidiaries Nuclear Electric Ltd. and Scottish Nuclear Ltd. (British Energy)—and one company which owns the magnox stations and their associated assets and liabilities, Nuclear Electric plc, which was renamed Magnox Electric plc on 1 April 1996.

In due course, British Energy and Magnox will be publishing their financial statements for the period ended 31 March 1996. These will give details of the companies' financial results for the period and their financial positions at that date. In addition, the prospectus for the sale of British Energy will give further information on its activities.

The companies intend to use a 3 per cent. real discount rate when calculating their nuclear liabilities for inclusion in their financial statements. A rate of 2 per cent. real was used in previous years. The change is consistent with recent United Kingdom accounting proposals and has been approved by the auditors of both companies. British Energy will be taking into the private sector the liabilities associated with its assets, including—using a 3 per cent. real discount rate—nuclear liabilities of approximately £3.7 billion for past use of fuel and for decommissioning. In addition, British Energy will owe debt and has inherited a debt due from Scottish Nuclear Ltd. to the Government which will be repaid before privatisation.

Whenever financial statements are produced the directors must consider the carrying value of the company's fixed assets as recorded in the accounting records. The Companies Act 1985 requires fixed assets as recorded int he accounting records. The Companies Act 1985 requires fixed assets to be written down if there has been a permanent diminution in value. This is a technical accounting matter and is purely an entry in the books of account. No cash changes hands as a result of such a write-down. It will have no effect on the cash generated by the stations, nor will it reduce the proceeds of sale—the company is expected to be valued by investors on the basis of its dividends and cash flow.

Asset write-downs by British Energy are a matter for the board of directors and the company's auditors. The board has informed me, ahead of the publication of its annual financial statements, of its provisional decision to write down the carrying value of the fixed assets. As a result, the fixed assets will stand in the balance sheet of British Energy at approximately £5 billion. There are two main elements in the change.

First, a decision was taken not to build any new UK nuclear power stations at present and accordingly the directors of Nuclear Electric plc decided to write off, in the accounting records, the first-of-a-kind costs of about £0.8 billion, incurred in building the UK's first PWR reactor, Sizewell B. This accounting write-off has been agreed with the company's auditors.

In addition, British Energy's directors' view of the long-term economic value of the stations differs from the views adopted when the 31 March 1995 accounts were finalised: in particular, the planned reduction in levels of payments under the primary nuclear contract and the ending of the nuclear energy agreement premium following privatisation; and lower than previous expectations of future electricity pool prices. I understand that, having considered these factors, the board of British Energy has concluded, with the agreement of its auditors, that there has been a permanent diminution in the value of certain nuclear fixed assets of about £1.2 billion. It will, therefore, as required by the Companies Act 1985, reduce the carrying value of the fixed assets in its accounting records.

In return for the disposal of the assets and liabilities related to the AGR/PWR stations in England and Wales, and the assumption of assets and liabilities related to the Hunterston A magnox station in Scotland, Magnox has received a financial undertaking from the Government. No payments are to be made under the undertaking before Magnox exhausts its other sources of funding, including cash and investments currently held—£3.0 billion at 31 March 1996—income from electricity generation, and outstanding fossil fuel levy income that is due. In recent years the nuclear generators have made significant improvements in their understanding and control of decommissioning costs and other nuclear liabilities; and the active management of Magnox Electric's costs and integration with BNFL should allow it to reduce its liabilities even further. Payments will be made under the undertaking only to the extent they are needed to enable Magnox to meet its financial obligations, including reprocessing, waste management and decommissioning costs, as those obligations fall due. The face value of the undertaking is initially capped at £3.8 billion at 31 March 1996. I have placed a copy of the undertaking in the Library of each House. Assurances on financial obligations given to Nuclear Electric plc in March 1990 by the then Secretary of State for Energy will remain in force for Magnox.

The Government are keen to secure the advantages of integrating Magnox into BNFL and will proceed with the process of integration after the privatisation of British Energy. Consultation with the Health and Safety Executive, Environment agencies, and others over the integration will begin in due course. In addition, the Government plan to free Magnox from some of the restrictions on contracting originally placed on Nuclear Electric plc—in particular, the requirement to offer electricity sale contracts by open tender. The Government intend that Magnox should be required to act in a commercial manner, and that it should be a full competitor in the electricity market.

Mr. Whittingdale: To ask the President of the Board of Trade which companies are now responsible for the nuclear power stations which were owned by Nuclear Electric and Scottish Nuclear before the restructuring of the nuclear industry. [29059]

Mr. Eggar: The nuclear power stations formerly owned by Nuclear Electric plc and Scottish Nuclear Ltd. are now owned by Magnox Electric plc and by British Energy plc's operating subsidiaries, Nuclear Electric Ltd. and Scottish Nuclear Ltd. The details are as follows:

Station	*Type*	*Company*
Stations formerly owned by Nuclear Electric plc		
Berkeley (decommissioning)	magnox	Magnox Electric plc
Bradwell	magnox	Magnox Electric plc
Dungeness A	magnox	Magnox Electric plc
Hinkley Point A	magnox	Magnox Electric plc
Oldbury	magnox	Magnox Electric plc
Sizewell A	magnox	Magnox Electric plc
Trawsfynydd (decommissioning)	magnox	Magnox Electric plc
Wylfa	magnox	Magnox Electric plc
Dungeness B	AGR	Nuclear Electric Ltd.
Hartlepool	AGR	Nuclear Electric Ltd.
Heysham 1	AGR	Nuclear Electric Ltd.
Heysham 2	AGR	Nuclear Electric Ltd.
Hinkley Point B	AGR	Nuclear Electric Ltd.
Sizewell B	PWR	Nuclear Electric Ltd.
Stations formerly owned by Scottish Nuclear Ltd.		
Hunterston A (decommissioning)	magnox	Magnox Electric plc
Hunterston B	AGR	Scottish Nuclear Ltd.
Torness	AGR	Scottish Nuclear Ltd.

In addition, the hydro-electric plant at Maentwrog is now owned by Magnox Electric plc.

Mr. Whittingdale: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what progress has been made on the issuing of licences and consents to British Energy and Magnox Electric. [29060]

Mr. Eggar: On 31 March 1996 new nuclear site licences came into force for each of the nuclear power stations owned by the British Energy group. These licences were granted by the Health and Safety Executive. On the same date, new discharge authorisations for Her Majesty's inspectorate of pollution and Her Majesty's industrial pollution inspectorate came into effect for British Energy plc's operating subsidiaries, Nuclear Electric Ltd. and Scottish Nuclear Ltd. respectively. The Director General of Electricity Supply has granted an electricity generation licence to Nuclear Electric Ltd. and is in the process of consulting on a modified electricity generation licence for Scottish Nuclear Ltd. Nuclear Electric Ltd. has also been granted with a second tier supply licence for England, Wales and Scotland.

Cuba

Mr. John Greenway: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement about the recent US legislation on Cuba. [29304]

Mr. Ian Taylor: I made a speech to a seminar hosted by the Caribbean trade advisory group on 2 May setting out Her Majesty's Government policy in respect of this legislation and how the interests of United Kingdom business could be protected if threatened by its provisions. A copy of this speech has been placed in the Library of the House.

As I Indicated in that speech, we are still seeking to clarify certain areas of deep concern about this potentially damaging piece of legislation. Our objection is to its attempts to interfere with the legitimate trade of UK companies outside US. In this connection, my officials will be meeting US State Department officials this week to establish details on how the latter intend to implement the provisions covering the exclusion of persons from the US. We will take the opportunity to reiterate the UK's concern that the Helms/Burton legislation could disrupt normal trading relationships with the USA. We shall consider carefully how to co-ordinate our response with our EU partners.

Equitas

Mr. John Greenway: To ask the President of the Board of Trade, pursuant to his answer to the hon. member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) on 29 March, *Official Report*, columns *762–64*, what developments there have been since 29 March concerning Equitas; and if he will make a statement. [29305]

Mr. Nelson: Since I announced the authorisation of Equitas on 29 March 1996, *Official Report*, columns *762–63*, further work has taken place on the level of liabilities which Equitas will reinsure and on the assets available to cover them. As a result, the expected opening balance sheet of Equitas will be significantly stronger than originally foreseen, while the increase in provisions for 1992 and prior liabilities required will be about £1.2 billion rather than the £1.5 billion or more previously envisaged. These developments improve the prospects that Equitas will be able to pay off its liabilities in full as they fall due.

Fossil Fuel Levy

Mr. Battle: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how much money was raised by the fossil fuel levy in each year from its inception to date; how much of that money was spent on renewables in each year; and how much money was retained by the Treasury in each year. [27948]

Mr. Page: The information requested is:

£ million

Year	*Amount raised*	*Paid to renewable generators*
1990–91	1,175	6
1991–92	1,324	12
1992–93	1,348	29
1993–94	1,233	68
1994–95	1,205	96
1995–96[1]	1,104	95

[1] Estimate.

The balance of levy receipts is used to finance payments to Nuclear Electric, British Nuclear Fuels plc in respect of nuclear electricity generated by its plant, and to cover certain other costs such as administration costs.

Industrial Death and Retirement Fund

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the President of the board of Trade (1) if he will place in the Library copies of the documentation held by his Department relating to the industrial death and retirement fund; [28888]

(2) if he will make it his policy that where British Coal intends to destroy documents relating to the industrial death and retirement fund a minimum of 42 days notice is given to the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers and to his own Department. [28887]

Mr. Page: These are matters for the British Coal Corporation, which is subject to the Public Records Act 1958.

Ostrich Farming

Mr. Harvey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans he has for compensation measures for ostrich breeders affected by his Department's investigation into the Ostrich Farming Corporation. [28527]

Mr. John M. Taylor: I see no reason to consider compensation payments.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on the progress of his Department's investigation into the Ostrich Farming Corporation. [28528]

Mr. Taylor: Following an investigation under Companies Act powers, on 28 March 1996 the Secretary of State presented a petition to wind up the company in the public interest. On 3 April 1996, at an opposed hearing, the court granted the Secretary of State's further application for the appointment of the official receiver as provisional liquidator pending the hearing of the petition. On 8 May the company stated its intention to oppose the

petition and the court allowed a further five weeks for the filing of evidence and indicated that the petition should be heard as soon as possible thereafter which it is expected, on present information will be before the end of July 1996.

Business Links

Mr. Harvey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is the forecast cost of the current Government-sponsored national advertising campaign for business links. [28536]

Mr. Page: The forecast cost of the 1996–97 business links national publicity campaign is £4 million, of which the budget for the national advertising campaign is £2.5 million.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what has been the cost to date of *(a)* setting up business links and *(b)* the services provided by business links; and if he will make a statement. [28522]

Mr. Page: DTI's contribution to date towards establishing the network is £53.6 million over the period 1993–94 to 1995–96. Over the same period DTI has provided £112.9 million for business support services. DTI only contributes part of the costs, with business links receiving other revenue from partner contributions in cash or in kind and from income generation activities including charges for services.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) what steps are being taken to monitor the use of funds provided to business links by his Department; [28535]

(2) what measures he has taken to prevent the misuse of departmental funds by a business link. [28538]

Mr. Page: All funding provided by DTI to business links is channelled through training and enterprise councils and is subject to a set of contactual requirements agreed by the relevant TEC.

In addition to the statutory requirements for business links companies and TECs to prepare financial statements, the following arrangements are in place to prevent the misuse of DTI funds provided to business links:

TECs are required by Government to have an effective system for the financial appraisal and monitoring of their providers, including business links.

Government office accountants teams visit each TEC at least once a year to check that funds are being claimed in accordance with the contractual requirements. In addition, for business links pump-priming funding:

before any grant is paid, a report is required from an independent accountant confirming that the TEC and business links accounting systems are sufficiently sound to enable the accountant to report on subsequent grant claims;

the final claim in each operational year must be accompanied by a report from the independent accountant confirming that claims for payment have been made in accordance with the relevant contractual requirements.

Business links pump-priming projects and services funding are monitored on a regular basis by Government office staff, who check that the project to establish the business links and the services are being delivered in accordance with the relevant contractual requirements.

In order to achieve accreditation Business Links must have documented systems in place to ensure effective management and financial accountability and a strategy for achieving and maintaining long-term financial viability.

Companies (Financial Assistance)

Mr. Jamieson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade which office of his Department is responsible for the granting of each form of financial assistance to businesses; what are the implications of the level of assistance for the division of responsibility between offices; and if he will make a statement. [27736]

Mr. Oppenheim *[holding answer 2 May 1996]:* A business wanting assistance from my Department should normally contact its local business link in the first instance. Procedures for final decisions on whether to offer assistance in particular cases vary depending on the scheme and on the level of assistance proposed.

Mr. Jamieson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what representations his Department has received since 1988 from hon. Members about financial assistance from his Department to (i) Ivens Electronics Ltd., (ii) Ridgewood Industries Ltd., (iii) Ridgewood Engineering Ltd., (iv) Ridgewood Electronics Ltd., (v) Ridgewood Holdings Ltd., (vi) Avocet Ltd. and (vii) MGC Technical Services Ltd. [21185]

Mr. Oppenheim *[holding answer 18 March 1996]:* We have been unable to trace records of representations from any hon. Member about financial assistance to these companies.

Mr. Jamieson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what representations his Department has received since 1985 from hon. Members about financial assistance from his Department to (i) Pendennis Shipyard Ltd., Falmouth, (ii) ModernTask Ltd., Redruth, (iii) Pan Atlantia (UK) plc, Birmingham, (iv) Cornish Stairways Ltd., Penryn, (v) Thimbles Ltd., Redruth and (vi) Queensbury International Ltd., Portsmouth. [21184]

Mr. Oppenheim *[holding answer 18 March 1996]:* We have been able to trace records of only one representation, from my hon. Friend the Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Mr. Coe) on behalf of a constituent concerning the implications of financial assistance to Pendennis Shipyard Ltd.

Joint Industry Board

Mr. McAllion: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what requests he has received for the trade unions certification officer to take the Joint Industry Board to court for contravention of the Trade Union Act 1984 during the period when it was registered as a trade union; and if he will make a statement. [28213]

Mr. John M. Taylor: The certification officer is an independent authority appointed by statute. Requests for the certification officer to investigate complaints are made directly to him and not to Ministers.

Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease

Mr. Alan W. Williams: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what funds were allocated to research into Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease and its possible relationship with bovine spongiform encephalopathy over the period *(a)* 1986 to 1990, *(b)* 1990–91 to 1995–96 and *(c)* 1996–97. [28518]

Mr. Ian Taylor: The information is not all available in the form requested.

The Department of Health and the Medical Research Council's expenditure on research into Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease and its possible relationship with BSE is as follows:

£ million

	1986–87 to 1987–88	*1988–89 to 1989–90*	*1990–91 to 1995–96*	*1996–97 (estimated spend)*
Department of Health	Nil	Nil	1.7	2.3
MRC	n/a	0.6	[1]3.6	n/a

[1] This figure includes an estimated spend of £700,000 for 1995–96, as the figure for this year has not yet been finalised.
n/a = not available

It is difficult to estimate the MRC's spend for 1996–97 because a forthcoming call for proposals in this area is likely to lead to increased spend in future years.

The Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council also supports research related to CJD, and over the period 1991–92 to 1997–98 it awarded grants to the value of £2.4 million.

WALES

Pembrokeshire NHS Trust (Auditors' Report)

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he proposes to place in the Library a copy of the auditors' report by Coopers and Lybrand into the circumstances leading up to, and financial implications of, the departure of the former chief executive of the Pembrokeshire NHS trust. [28889]

Mr. Richards: A report under section 20(3) of the NHS and Community Care Act 1990 has recently been received from the trust's external auditors. I shall write to the hon. Member when it has been properly considered.

Oil Spillage (Sea Empress Incident)

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) what information has been requested by the Environment Agency from his Department about the Sea Empress oil spillage; when that information was requested; and if he will place a copy of his Department's reply in the Library; [28866]

(2) if he will place in the Library copies of the letters sent by the Environment Agency requesting information from Government Departments about the Sea Empress oil spillage. [28865]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: There have been close contacts between the Welsh Office and the agency on a range of matters associated with the Sea Empress oil spillage. It is not my usual practice to place copies of correspondence between the Environment Agency and the Welsh Office in the Library of the House.

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what investigations are being carried out by the Environment Agency into the spillage of oil from the Sea Empress. [28863]

Mr. Jones: The agency is collecting a broad range of information relating to its responsibilities for the protection of the environment.

Read Codes System

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the licence income paid by different segments of the NHS in Wales for participating in or helping to develop the Read codes system. [28936]

Mr. Hague: The value for money of licence fees charged to NHS trusts in Wales for use of Read codes is under consideration as part of the pilot project based at Pembrokeshire NHS trust.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Calf Slaughter

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received about the calf slaughter scheme. [28871]

Mr. Baldry: I have received a number of representations about this scheme. They relate mainly to the requirement for processors to give three days' notice of presentation of animals for slaughter and the penalties if the number actually presented does not tally with that notified in advance. My officials are pressing the EU Commission for a relaxation of these rules so as to make the scheme more flexible.

Cattle Slaughter

Dr. Strang: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how long he estimates it will take the approved slaughterhouses to slaughter those cattle currently over the age of 30 months. [28324]

Mr. Baldry *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* It is too early to make a meaningful estimate of this kind. The slaughter programme has now started and we aim to remove the backlog of cattle as quickly as possible.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what facilities will be available in the county of Northumberland to collect cull cows and cattle of over 30 months for a slaughter; and if he will designate Acklington mart for this purpose. [28543]

Mr. Baldry *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* Several centres in Northumberland, including Acklington, and others at Hexham, Morpeth and Wooler, are included in the provisional list of markets being designated as collection centres for the slaughter of cattle over 30 months.

EC Beef Ban

Mr. Marlow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will set out the main points of the report by the Scientific Veterinary Committee that was consulted by the EC Commission with regard to beef on 22 March. [24889]

Mrs. Browning *[holding answer 16 April 1996]:* I have placed in the Library of the House a copy of the conclusions of the Scientific Veterinary Committee's meeting of 22 March.

In the view of the committee, the data presented at the meeting on the new variant of CJD do not to date provide evidence that BSE is transmissible to man.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Drugs Misuse

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which committees, Ministers and officials within his Department are responsible for the development of a multi-agency and cross-Government Department approach on the misuse of drugs; and if he will make a statement. [28254]

Mr. Sackville: The ministerial sub-committee of the Cabinet on the misuse of drugs, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Lord President of the Council, co-ordinates the work of Departments, including the Home Office, involved in tackling drug misuse. The Lord President is supported in his co-ordinating role by the central drugs co-ordination unit. Independent advice to Government is provided by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs.

Police and Fire Services

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what additional resources the Government are making available to meet increased costs from pensions, inflation and other unavoidable costs in the police and fire services; and if he will make a statement. [28245]

Mr. Maclean *[holding answer 9 May 1996]:* For the police service in England and Wales the settlement for 1996–97 included an extra £79.9 million for pensions, £123.6 million for pay and other inflationary pressures, and a further £20 million to enable the police service to recruit 1,000 additional constables by the end of 1996–97. The Association of Chief Police Officers and the police authority associations play a valuable role in forecasting additional pressures on police authority budgets. Their views will be taken into account in the 1997–98 spending round.

For the fire service for England, the settlement for 1996–97 included an extra £14 million for pensions and £3 million for training. The total fire standard spending assessments are distributed to individual fire authorities by means of a formula. This was adjusted to take account of factors for pensions and fire safety for 1996–97 in line with recommendations by the Audit Commission. The formula is looked at each year and local authority representatives play a full part in that review.

Mr. Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what plans he has to increase the length of service for police and firemen from 30 years to 35 years before securing a full pension; and if he will make a statement; [28250]

(2) what percentage of *(a)* firemen and *(b)* police officers retire on ill health grounds with less than 30 years service; and if he will make a statement on how these figures affect each pension scheme. [28252]

Mr. Maclean *[holding answer 9 May 1996]:* The information about the number of retirements on ill health grounds is not available in the form requested. The details of the police and fire service pension schemes have been under review. The results will shortly be the subject of consultation with police and fire interests.

Mr. Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the cost in real terms of the police and fire service pension schemes in each of the last 10 years; what estimate he has made of these costs for each of the next 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [28251]

Mr. Maclean *[holding answer 9 May 1996]:* The net cost of the police and fire pensions scheme between 1985–86 and 1994–95, as actual expenditure and at 1996–97 prices, is set out in the tables. Projections of costs from 1995–96 to 1999–2000 are available only in respect of police pensions as set out in the tables.

Additional provision for police pensions has been made available in the last four settlements. The rising trend in police and fire pensions costs is being monitored and assessed in the context of each spending round.

Police pensions

£ million

Year	*Net expenditure (actual)*	*Net expenditure (at 1996–97 prices)*
Actual outturn[1]		
1985–86	187	306
1986–87	224	356
1987–88	237	357
1988–89	254	359
1989–90	292	386
1990–91	333	407
1991–92	409	471
1992–93	461	510
1993–94	543	584
1994–95	611	645
Estimates[2]		
1995–96	702	721
1996–97	793	793
1997–98	830	810
1998–99	884	848
1999–2000	949	—

[1] Outturn figures from 1985–86 to 1993–94 were calculated from gross pensions expenditure and pensions income (pensions holding account) in the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy's *Police Statistics (Actuals)*. In the absence of CIPFA Actuals for 1994–95, figures for 1994–95 were calculated from authorities' returns to the Home Office (revenue grant claim forms).
[2] Projections from 1995–96 onwards were derived from Government Actuary Department models. Actual expenditure was expressed at 1996–97 prices using the latest GDP deflators which run to 1998–99.

Fire pensions

£ million

Year	*Net expenditure (actual)*	*Net expenditure (at 1996–97 prices)*
Actual outturn[1]	50	82
1985–86	58	92
1986–87	64	96
1987–88	73	104
1988–89	84	111
1989–90	98	120
1990–91	117	135
1991–92	131	144
1992–93	147	158
1993–94	159	168
1994–95		

[1] Outturn figures from 1985–86 to 1994–95 were calculated from authorities' revenue outturn returns to the Department of the Environment and the Welsh Office.

Metropolitan Police

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the cost of *(a)* out-of-court settlements and *(b)* awards made in court against the Metropolitan police in each of the last three years and the current year to date; and what were the legal costs in each such year. [28907]

Mr. Maclean: Information on the legal costs in each year could be provided only at disproportionate cost. The following is the other information requested.

Calendar year	*1993* £	*1994* £	*1995* £	[1]*1996* £
Out-of-court settlements[2] (in 000s)	1,536	1,259	1,293	396
Court awards (in 000s)	53	84	267	839
Total	1,589	1,343	1,560	1,235

[1] To 8 May.

[2] Including High Court writs, county court summonses and threatened actions.

Prisons (Drugs)

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners have tested positive for drugs in each month of the last three years and of these how many have subsequently tested positive again; and if he will make a statement. [28237]

Miss Widdecombe *[holding answer 8 May 1996]:* Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Butler to Mr. Alex Carlile, dated 10 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question about the number of prisoners who have tested positive for drugs in the last three years and how many have tested positive more than once.

Mandatory drug testing (MDT) has been introduced as a phased programme since February 1995. No drug test results are available before that date. A table setting out the number of prisons in which MDT has been implemented and the number of confirmed positive random test results each month is attached. Results for other forms of mandatory drug testing are not yet centrally collated.

The data available to Prison Service headquarters is supplied by the drug testing laboratory. To protect confidentiality, the laboratory is only able to identify the sample and not the prisoner who provided it. Because of this, data on prisoners who have tested positive more than once could only be supplied at a disproportionate cost by reviewing every establishment's records.

Mandatory drug testing random testing programme: numbers testing positive February 1995 to February 1996

Month	*Number of prisons testing at end of month*	*Number positive*
1995		
February	6	78
March	7	122
April	8	127
May	8	84
June	8	113
July	8	138
August	8	57
September	15	171
October	23	195
November	43	429
December	68	601
1996		
January	97	663
February	121	920

[1] Until October 1995 the statistics reflected all positive test results. For example, a prisoner who tested positive for both cannabis and cocaine was counted as two positive tests. Hence, the numbers of tests positive between February to September 1995 are distorted slightly upwards. Since October such multiple positives have been factored out of the statistics.

Checking of statistical returns for January and February 1996 has revealed a number of errors. Error checking continues and this data must be regarded as provisional.

Young Offenders

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his estimate of the offending rate for 15, 16 and 17-year-old *(a)* boys and *(b)* girls in each of the last three years for which figures are available; and what information he has collated on the number convicted or cautioned for previous offences. [28174]

Mr. Maclean: Information on the offending rate for males and females aged 15 to 17 years is given in the table.

Information collated on the numbers convicted for previous offences appears in the annual Command Paper, "Criminal statistics, England and Wales", which is available in the Library. Figures for 1991 and 1993 appeared in chapter 9 of the 1993 and 1994 issues respectively. There is no information collated on the number cautioned for previous offences.

Offending rate[1] *for persons aged 15, 16 and 17 by sex 1992–1994 England and Wales*

Sex and type of offence/year	*Age 15*	*16*	*17*
Males			
Indictable (excluding motoring offences)			
1992	6,710	7,513	8,479

Offending rate[1] for persons aged 15, 16 and 17 by sex 1992–1994
England and Wales

Sex and type of offence/year	*Age 15*	*16*	*17*
1993	6,088	6,668	8,232
1994	6,175	6,882	8,000
Females			
Indictable (excluding motoring offences)			
1992	2,420	2,178	1,971
1993	1,995	1,849	1,813
1994	1,114	1,842	1,688

[1] Offending rate is the number per 100,000 population found guilty or cautioned.

Special Constables

Mr. Touhig: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the current average cost of recruiting, training and equipping a special constable. [28205]

Mr. Maclean: It is not, so far, common practice for force finance departments to maintain separate records of expenditure for special constabulary activities. In general, these costs are absorbed into the operating costs of the regular force and borne by the police fund. Therefore, it is not possible to give accurate average costs.

Costs will also vary according to the type of equipment favoured by each force, and the different combinations of regular officers, civilian staff and special constables involved in recruitment, training and administration.

As a rough guide, it has been estimated that a special constable will cost his or her force some £1,500 in the first year to recruit, train and equip: thereafter, the annual cost is about £500.

Mr. Touhig: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to change the name of the special constabulary. [28203]

Mr. Maclean: There are no plans to do so. The special constabulary is a generic name for the 43 special constabularies of England and Wales.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to reply to the letters sent to him on 22 January, 23 February and 27 March from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, with regard to Stephen Hall, an inmate of Littlehay Prison.

Miss Widdecombe *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* My right hon. and learned Friend replied on 3 May.

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply to his letter to the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Leeds, North-East (Mr. Kirkhope), of 3 April—Home Office reference PO4618/96—about his constituent. [28547]

Mr. Kirkhope: I have written to the hon. Gentleman today.

Parole Board

Mr. Congdon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to revise his directions to the Parole Board. [29306]

Miss Widdecombe: We have revised our directions to the Parole Board on the release and recall of determinate sentence prisoners, originally issued in 1992 under section 32(6) of the Criminal Justice Act 1991, in order to tighten and clarify the framework within which parole decisions are made. We have asked Lord Belstead, chairman of the Parole Board, to implement these directions as soon as possible. Copies of the new directions have been placed in the Library.

The main changes to the directions on release are as follows:

- there is a more explicit statement about the need to protect the safety of the public being a paramount factor;
- it is made clear that the board can take into account the nature and circumstances of the original offence when assessing risk;
- it is made clear that previous post-release behaviour must be considered; and
- emphasis is placed on the need to take into account, in the case of a violent or sexual offender, any previous convictions for violence or for sexual offences.

The directions on recall have been recast in such a way as to preserve consistency with the revised directions on release.

Firearms

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list all firearms which do not currently require a licence; and if he will make a statement. [28253]

Mr. Maclean: The only weapons which meet the definition of a firearm in the Firearms Acts but do not require a firearm certificate are low powered air weapons and antique firearms kept as curiosities or ornaments. In addition there are several exemptions under the Firearms Acts to the general requirement to have a certificate issued by the police, but these are dependent on the user, or the proposed use of the weapon, rather than the firearm itself.

Mr. Touhig: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many *(a)* firearm certificates and *(b)* shotgun certificates have been issued in (i) 1980, (ii) 1985, (iii) 1992, (iv) 1993, (v) 1994 and (vi) 1995; [28258]

(2) how many registered firearms dealers there were in the United Kingdom in *(a)* 1980, *(b)* 1985, *(c)* 1992, *(d)* 1993, *(e)* 1994 and *(f)* 1995; [28266]

(3) how many firearm certificates and shotgun certificates have been revoked in accordance with section 30 of the Firearms Act 1968 in *(a)* 1980, *(b)* 1985, *(c)* 1992, *(d)* 1993, *(e)* 1994 and *(f)* 1995. [28257]

Mr. Maclean: The available information for 1985, 1992, 1993 and 1994 is published in Home Office statistical bulletin "Firearm Certificate Statistics, England and Wales", copies of which can be found in the Library.

Figures for 1980 and for the number of registered firearms dealers and the number of firearm and shotgun certificates revoked in 1985 are not available centrally.

Provisional figures for 1995 show that 49,000 firearm and 220,700 shotgun certificates were issued in England and Wales and 2,470 firearms dealers were registered at 31 December. A total of 206 firearm and 685 shotgun certificates were revoked.

Figures for Scotland are a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland and figures for Northern Ireland are a matter for my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 13 May 1996

HOME DEPARTMENT

Prison Service

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will restore the planned reductions in the Prison Service budget. [27859]

Miss Widdecombe: The Government have made additional funding available to the Prison Service for security improvements, combating drug abuse and to cater for expected increases in the prison population, but they believe that efficiency savings can be achieved and that the privately managed prisons have shown that lower costs are possible without putting security and control at risk. The savings being required of the Prison Service over the next three years are broadly consistent with those expected of the public services generally. There are no plans to reduce the requirement.

Doncaster Prison

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answers to the hon. Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox) of 16 April, *Official Report*, columns *362–63*, and 13 March, *Official Report*, column *631*, why Doncaster prison was omitted from the list of prisons which carried out dye stamping of visitors. [27643]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Butler to Mr. Martin Redmond, dated 13 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question about dye stamping of visitors to prisons.

I regret that the reply to Mr. Cox's Question was not comprehensive. Records of prisons using dye stamping are not routinely kept, as it is a matter for the governor's discretion whether to use the system. The information on which the reply was based had been collected for another purpose, and did not reveal that Doncaster used dye stamping.

The Director General's reply to your Question of 13 March was separately researched and unfortunately the result was not included in the reply to the later Question. Investigation of this error has revealed that Bedford prison was also missing from the list.

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on current staff morale within the Prison Service. [28172]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Butler to Dr. Lynne Jones, dated 13 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question about the current level of staff morale within the Prison Service.

Prison Service staff perform a difficult job within a considerable degree of dedication. The Service is facing a number of pressures, including the increase in the prison population and, in common with other public services, the need to make efficiency savings. But the Service, is approaching the task professionally, in consultation with unions and staff and with a firm determination to maintain the balance between essential security and control measures, constructive and effective regimes for prisoners and providing support for staff.

Prison Population

Mr. George Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to the answer to the hon. and learned Member for Montgomery (Mr. Carlile) of 29 April, *Official Report*, column *399*, on the prison population, if he will list the number of prisoners held *(a)* in prison and *(b)* in police cells, on the last day of each of the last 24 months. [28347]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Serivces, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Butler to Mr. George Howarth, dated 13 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question asking pursuant to the Answer to the honourable Member for Montgomery of 29 April on the prison population, if he will list the number of prisoners held (a) in prison and (b) in police cells, on the last day of each of the last day of each of the last 24 months.

The requested information is given in the attached table.

Population in Prison Service establishments and police cells in England and Wales on the last day of the month, April 1994–April 1996

Date	*In Prison Service establishments*	*Police cells*	*Total*
1994			
April	47,719	224	47,943
May	48,532	143	48,675
June	48,879	50	48,929
July	49,095	74	49,169
August	49,194	198	49,392
September	49,554	258	49,812
October	49,710	141	49,851
November	50,427	138	50,565
December	47,550	61	47,611
1995			
January	49,408	134	49,542
February	50,40	162	50,571
March	51,220	374	51,594
April	50,559	228	50,787
May	50,516	127	50,643
June	51,084	—	51,084
July	51,279	—	51,279
August	51,265	—	51,265
September	51,286	—	51,286
October	52,027	—	52,027
November	52,540	—	52,540
December	49,949	—	49,949

Population in Prison Service establishments and police cells in England and Wales on the last day of the month, April 1994–April 1996

Date	In Prison Service establishments	Police cells	Total
1996			
January	51,947	—	51,947
February	53,178	—	53,178
March	53,740	—	53,740
April[1]	54,211	—	54,211

[1] Provisional figures.

Mr. Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to the answer given to the hon. and learned Member for Montgomery (Mr. Carlile) on 29 April, *Official Report*, column *399*, on the prison population, when he expects to receive the Home Office feasibility study on the super-max prison; when he expects its publication; and when a decision will be announced on whether to commission such a prison. [28349]

Miss Widdecombe: The Prison Service submitted to Ministers its report examining the feasibility, costs and benefits of building a maximum security prison to house the most dangerous prisoners in the system and a control prison to hold the most unruly and disruptive prisoners, on 30 April. No decisions have yet been made on publications, timing or whether, and if so how, this project should proceed.

Prison Staff (Overtime)

Mr. George Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what is the average number of hours of overtime worked by prison staff for which time off in lieu is outstanding for each financial year since 1991–92 for each prison establishment; [28346]

(2) how many hours of overtime were worked by prison staff for which time off in lieu is outstanding for each prison establishment. [28319]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Butler to Mr. George Howarth, dated 13 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Questions about overtime worked by prison staff and time off in lieu.

Prison officers have not worked overtime since the current (Fresh Start) working arrangements were introduced in 1987, when the average amount of overtime worked was 16 hours per week.

The Fresh Start agreement allowed for fluctuations in staffing levels to be met by the movement of officers' shifts or the anticipation of hours to be repaid by time off in lieu. The balance of additional hours/time off in lieu fluctuates throughout the year and from prison to prison.

The figures you request are not currently collected centrally and could be produced only at disproportionate cost. We are, however, able to provide you with information, for the period between April 1993 and July 1995, which was collected for a particular exercise and is given in the attached tables.

I have arranged for a copy of these tables to be placed in the Library.

Prisons (Directors' Emergencies)

Mr. George Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the number of directors' emergencies which were called, and the reasons for calling them during each financial year since 1991–92 for each prison establishment. [28320]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Butler to Mr. George Howarth, dated 13 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question about 'directors'
emergencies'.

The term 'directors' emergencies' is not in common usage in the Prison Service but there are occasions when, for operational reasons, the normal provisions of our Industrial Relations Procedural Agreement are overridden—for example when a failure to agree has been registered by a branch of the Prison Officers' Association about plans for a prison to take additional prisoners, when this has been necessary to avoid holding prisoners in police cells. Such occasions are infrequent and no central record is kept of them.

Parole

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners in England and Wales were paroled during 1995. [28601]

Miss Widdecombe: Provisional figures show that around 1,600 prisoners were recommended for parole during 1995.

Art Theft

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what use the police are making of private enterprise firms with computerised databases and specialised knowledge of art theft. [27851]

Mr. Maclean: The police work closely with the art loss register, which has a database of around 70,000 items. The Government consider this is an excellent example of partnership between the police and private enterprise.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of recent trends in the theft of art and antiques in the United Kingdom. [27852]

Mr. Maclean: None. The recorded crime figures do not separately identify theft of art and antiques. However, the National Criminal Intelligence Service is aware of the problem of art thefts. Many local police forces have specialist computer systems which enable them to exchange information with each other.

Buckley Hall Prison

Ms Lynne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 24 April, *Official Report*, column *170*, relating to Buckley Hall prison, what were the reasons for determining that a new Prison Service establishment should not be inspected until it had been operational for at least two years; and what was the

previous policy for the time taken before a prison faced an inspection under Her Majesty's Inspectorate annual programme of inspections. [28879]

Miss Widdecombe: The decision not to inspect new establishments until they have been operational for two years was taken in 1993 by the then chief inspector, who considered that that amount of time was necessary for new establishments to consolidate those aspects of their work which would be under scrutiny by his staff. Before 1993, the decision when to inspect new establishments was taken on the basis of such information as was known about each individual prison.

Agecroft (Prison Site)

Mr. Sumberg: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what alternative sites to the Agecroft site in Salford were investigated by the Prison Service for the siting of a new prison; and what were the reasons the Agecroft site was preferred against each of such alternatives. [29077]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Pearson to Mr. David Sumberg, dated 13 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reapply to your recent Question about sites which were considered as alternatives to the Agecroft site in Salford.

Information about alternative sites considered and rejected by the Prison Service is provided in the attached table.

The Agecroft site, in comparison with the other locations considered:

made strategic sense in terms of other Prison Service establishments and courts in Greater Manchester;

was suitable in terms of topography and ground conditions;

was in the urban area, but was in a wedge of land largely isolated from its surroundings by a river and a canal. It was also at a considerable distance from large housing developments;

was not allocated to any alternative use in the local planning control documents or policies;

was available for sale (the owners of several other sites indicated that they would not sell) and at a price which the Prison Service could afford.

Sites in Manchester

Site	*LPA*	*Vendor/Owner*	*Comment*
Eastlands	Manchester City Council	Manchester City Council	Large amount of land, but reserved for project for millennium funding.
Ardwick Goods Yard Site	Manchester City Council	Manchester City Council	Already allocated to local industrial users who are moving from Eastlands. 11 acres available (too small).
Middleton	Rochdale MBC	Mixed	Land assembly delays/uncertainties; remote from public transport; surrounded by housing; and significant sections in Green Belt. Not for development before late 1997–98.
Godley Hill	Tameside MBC	Tameside MBC/ other owners	Site is small, badly shaped and undulating, as such not suitable for a prison. Problems of access and land assembly.
Dewsnap Sidings	Tameside MBC	Tameside MBC	43 acres with good public transport in area. But possible highway access difficulties and adjoining high density housing estates. Vendor refused to negotiate sale. Developer selected—permission granted. Development to start May/June 1995.
Linnyshaw	Salford MBC	Manchester Ship Canal Company	Green belt land. Wwaiting outcome of UDP objection.
—	Bury MBC	—	Too small (12 acres) and access problems as prospective vendor specified off-site access.
Weaste Quarry Weaste & Seedley	Salford MBC	British Coal	Within an industrial area. Site allocated under Salford Unitary Development Plan for industrial and warehousing use. Some development already under way. previous excavation and tipping make part of site unusable.
Royal Ordinance Survey Factory Eccles	Salford MBC	Royal Ordinance	Within industrial/commercial area. Allcoated for business and high tech uses in Salford UDP. Too small and surrounded by housing.
Barton Eccles	Salford MBC	Mixed including Manchester CC	Proposed for regional shopping centre (UDP). Planning application under judicial review. High amenity site for high tech industry and business. Partly owned by Manchester CC. Legal objections to this now dismissed.

			Reason
Broadway Oldham	Oldham	—	Allocated within Oldham Development Plan for industry and warehousing. Fragmented site—maximum single area available 12 acres (too small).
Queens Road Cheetham Hill	Manchester City Council	Manchester City Council	Used as a tip—unsuitable for building.
Ashton Moss	Tameside MBC	Mixed inc. Tameside MBC	Part within Green Belt. Planning permission for high quality industrial estate, site available late 1997–1998 when motorway completed.
Kingswater	—	North West Water	Subject to tenancies necessitating removal of two golf clubs—timing a problem.
Wharfside	Trafford MBC	Multiple	20 acre site available—2 developers working up proposal for 80 bedroomed hotel and 70,000 sq ft of B1 use for first tranche. Some development has now taken place.
Northwest Direct	Trafford MBC	Gazeley Properties	Contains a significant number of activities on site that handle hazardous substances. 30 acre site ASDA superstore being built on site. Plans for petrol filling station, Costco and cinema on remainder.
The Village	Trafford MBC	Trafford MBC	Contains a significant number of activities that handle hazardous substances. Site broken into small units; total available 20 acres. Maximum site size 4 acres.
Hough End Playing Fields	Manchester City Council	Manchester City Council	Used for recreation. Council unlikely to sell. Restrictive convenant for public open space.

Adoption

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what date the Home Office received an application on behalf of the child whose name has been passed to him to allow that child indefinite leave to remain here for the purposes of adoption; on what date the Home Office notified the parties concerned of its decision to allow that child to remain in the United Kingdom; and for what reasons there was a delay in processing this application. [29189]

Mr. Kirkhope: We have no trace of such an application.

Fire Service

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much money in real terms *(a)* overall and *(b)* specifically for mileage reimbursement has been allocated to local government for the fire service in each area of England and Wales in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [28246]

Mr. Sackville *[holding answer 9 May 1996]:* The amount allocated for mileage reimbursement from within budgets is a matter for each fire authority. Details are not held centrally. Information of the overall financial provision for individual brigades is not available in the form requested and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what percentage of the revenue budget for each fire service authority is used to meet pension costs; and if he will make a statement. [28249]

Mr. Sackville *[holding answer 9 May 1996]:* The information requested has been placed in the Library.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Upper Waiting Hall Exhibition

Mr. Coe: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee if he has considered an application for a displayed exhibition relating to the Myasthenia Gravis Association to be held in the Upper Waiting Hall. [29327]

Mr. Michael J. Martin: I understand that, under procedures agreed by the Administration Committee, arrangements have been made for the exhibition to be held in the Upper Waiting Hall from Monday 10 June to Friday 14 June 1996.

TREASURY

Taxation

Mr. Alan W. Williams: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the total amount of taxation that will be paid by the average family during 1996–97; and how much this would have been if 1992–93 rates of taxation now applied. [28519]

Mr. Jack: The available information is contained in the table.

Tax paid by a one-earner couple on male average earnings with two children[1]

£ per week in 1996–97

	Actual tax system	*[2]1992–93 tax system*
Income tax	50.21	55.12
Income tax and NICs	85.06	87.10

[1] Assumes only income is that from earnings. Child benefit is treated as a negative income tax.
[2] 1992–93 tax rates and allowances.

Tax Office, Salisbury

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will review the decision to close the tax office at Salisbury; and if he will make a statement; [28994]

(2) if he will place in the Library the background papers which formed the basis for the decision to close the Salisbury tax office; and if he will make a statement on the costs and benefits of the proposed closure; [28995]

(3) what market research was commissioned by his Department prior to the closure of the Salisbury tax office to assess the effects on local businesses and individuals; [28996]

(4) what estimate has been made of the increase in levels of tax evasion and uncollected tax which will result from the closure of the Salisbury tax office; and if he will make a statement. [28997]

Mr. Jack: No decision has been taken to close the tax office at Salisbury.

Mr. Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the number of visits made to the Salisbury tax office by local residents in the latest year for which information is available. [28998]

Mr. Jack: During the year to March 1996, 10,126 visits were made by members of the public to Salisbury tax office and tax inquiry centre. Although it is not possible to estimate the number of visits made by local residents, it is likely that the majority of these visits were made by individuals who either live or work in the Salisbury area.

ENVIRONMENT

County Hall

Mr. Tony Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what applications have been received by his Department in respect of the operation of an aquarium by Shirayana Shokusan in the county hall, London SE1. [28926]

Sir Paul Beresford: My Department has received no applications for either listed building consent or planning permission relating to the operation of the proposed aquarium at county hall.

Mr. Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what is the current location of the chairman of the GLC's chair. [28920]

Sir Paul Beresford: That is a matter for the owners of the riverside building of county hall.

Mr. Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how much remains to be paid by Shirayana Shokusan to the London residuary body for the purchase of county hall; and when he expects to be paid this sum. [28924]

Sir Paul Beresford: The contract for the sale of county hall provided for a deferred sum of £10 million to be paid to the London residuary body from April 1997, subject to the full sum being paid by 2012. Following the winding up of the London residuary body on 29 March of this year, the London borough of Bromley inherited the remaining rights and liabilities in respect of county hall including those in relation to the payment of this sum.

Mr. Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what payments have been made to the London residuary body by Whitbread plc in respect of the that company's involvement in the development of county hall. [28925]

Sir Paul Beresford: Prior to the winding up of the London residuary body on 29 March 1996, Whitbread plc had not been required to make any payments to the residuary body in respect of the development of county hall.

Direct Labour Organisations

Mr. Merchant: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what action he proposes to take against those local authorities whose direct labour organisations failed to meet their statutory financial obligations in 1994–95. [29186]

Mr. Congdon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what action he proposes to take against those local authorities whose direct labour and direct service organisations failed to meet their statutory financial objectives in 1994–95. [29281]

Sir Paul Beresford: On 13 February this year, 19 statutory notices were served on eight local authorities concerning the failure of their direct labour and service organisations to meet the required financial objectives in 1994–95. My right hon. Friend has now considered the responses to those notices, and has decided to take action against six local authorities.

Each of the six local authorities which are the subject of today's announcement recorded losses in 1994–95 in excess of £500,000 on work they carried out. The action we have taken today will ensure that, where authorities are failing to put their houses in order, they will have to subject the work to a fresh competition.

In some cases, the in-house team will be barred from competing if it has been a consistently poor performer in recent years. The end result will be either better-run in-house teams or the use of private contractors. This will ultimately be for the benefit of local taxpayers.

The directions take the following five forms:

preventing the following authority from carrying out the work after a specified date: Hereford and Worcester (building maintenance).

restricting the work carried out by the DSO and preventing the authority from carrying out the remainder of the work if it fails to meet the financial objective in 1996–97 or 1997–98: Burnley borough council (building maintenance).

requiring the authority to retender the work and to seek the consent of the Secretary of State if proposing to award the work in-house: Burnley borough council (highways and sewers).

preventing an authority from carrying out the work if it fails to meet the financial objective in 1996–97 or 1997–98: the London borough of Southwark (building maintenance).

requiring authorities to retender the work if they fail to meet the financial objective in a specified year or years, and to seek the Secretary of State's consent where the work has to be retendered and where the authority subsequently wishes to award work in-house:

1995–96 and 1996–97: Hereford and Worcester county council (highways and sewers), Kingston-Upon-Hull city council (building cleaning, building maintenance and grounds maintenance), and Salford city council (grounds maintenance).

1996–97: St. Helens MBC (highways and sewers).

1996–97 and 1997–98: Burnley borough council (other catering).

The Secretary of State has also decided to take no further statutory action in respect of financial failure in 1993–94 by:

New Forest district council (highways and sewers) and Salford city council (highways and sewers and schools and welfare catering).

He is still considering the response from Liverpool city council (schools and welfare catering, vehicle maintenance, building cleaning, grounds maintenance and highways and sewers).

In addition to the 19 notices served on 13 February, a further 26 were served on 22 local authorities on 2 April. Responses to these notices are currently being considered, and our decisions will be announced in June. Further notices for financial failure will be issued later in the year, and we expect to have announced all of our decisions by the end of October.

The Secretary of State has also decided to revoke a direction given on 22 August 1995 to Hereford and Worcester county council for schools and welfare catering work, following financial failure in 1993–94.

Environment Agency

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what steps his Department has taken to inform parish councils of the role and responsibilities of the new Environment Agency. [28646]

Mr. Clappsion *[holding answer 10 May 1996]:* None. The Environment Agency has contacted local organisations to inform them of the agency's role and responsibilities.

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what contact his Department has had with district and parish councils in Lancashire over the role and responsibilities of the Environment Agency in Lancashire. [28647]

Mr. Clappsion *[holding answer 10 May 1996]:* The Department consulted the local authority associations on its proposals for the Environment Agency, its scope and responsibilities.

HEALTH

Residual Trust Property (Manchester)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the value of the North West regional health authority residual trust property which is being transferred to Manchester health authority; and where it is located. [28099]

Mr. Horam: No trust fund property is to be transferred to Manchester health authority.

Grant Aid Funding

Miss Lestor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 30 April, *Official Report*, column *500*, if he will list *(a)* the non-London organisations which have received section 64 grant aid funding for the provision of service to HIV clients and *(b)* the organisations receiving first time grants under section 64 grant aid funding for the provision of services to HIV clients, for the financial year 1996–97. [28465]

Mr. Horam: The non-London organisations which are currently receiving section 64 grant aid funding for the provision of services to HIV clients for the financial year 1996–97 are as follows:

National Network of Body Positive Groups;

Body Positive North East.

The organisations receiving first-time grants under section 64 grant aid funding for provision of services to HIV clients, for the financial year 1996–97 are as follows:

Positive Care Link;

National Network of Body Positive Groups;

UK Coalition of People Living with HIV and Aids;

Body Positive North East.

A new grant was also awarded to the National AIDS Trust, although this was not a first-time grant for the organisation.

Milk (Nutritional Value)

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated regarding the nutritional value of milk consumed by children between the ages of 11 and 16 years; and if he will make a statement. [28530]

Mr. Horam: *(a)* The Department, together with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, has commissioned, through the national diet and nutrition survey programme, a survey designed to assess the habitual diet of school children aged four to 18 years. The results of this survey will give information about the amount and nutritional value of milk consumed by children between the ages of 11 and 16 years.

(b) None.

Dental Services (General Anaesthetics)

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will place in the Library the guidelines currently in place for dentists who give general anaesthetics in their dental surgeries. [28620]

Mr. Malone: The Department has issued no guidelines for dentists who give general anaesthetics in their surgeries, as this is a professional matter for the relevant professional bodies. The General Dental Council, in May 1993, published "Professional Conduct and Fitness to Practise", copies of which are available in the Library; paragraphs 17 to 28 are guidelines on general anaesthesia, sedation and resuscitation.

BSE

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when his Department received advice from the Committee on the Safety of Medicines concerning the sourcing of materials from cattle under six months from BSE—free herds; what steps were subsequently taken as a result of this advice; and when. [27980]

Mr. Horam: In February 1989, at the request of the Licensing Authority, the Committee on the Safety of Medicines, the Committee on Dental and Surgical Materials and the Veterinary Products Committee, convened an expert group to formulate guidelines on the sourcing of bovine materials for the use in the manufacture of medicinal products. These guidelines were considered and agreed by the CSM at its February 1989 meeting. The guidelines recommended that source animals should be calves up to six months of age. A letter containing these joint CSM-VPC Guidelines was sent to the pharmaceutical industry. The industry was asked to provide information on the source and type of material of animal origin used in the manufacture of medicines. Subsequently, the bovine spongiform encephalopathy working party was established jointly by the CSM and VPC. This group considered the replies from companies at its October 1989 and subsequent meetings. Companies changed their source of bovine materials to non-UK sources for parenteral, ocular and topical products applied to broken skin. All products licensed since the 1989 CSM-VPC guidelines were issued, and the subsequent European Committee on Proprietary Medicinal Products 1992 guidelines, which replaced them, have been assessed in accordance with the guidelines for the acceptability of the bovine materials used.

Private Hospitals

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many private hospitals there were (i) by region (ii) nationally in each of the last five years; [29192]

(2) what estimate he has made of the number of private hospital beds (i) by region and (ii) nationally in each of the last five years. [29191]

Mr. Malone: Information relating solely to private hospitals is not available centrally. Information on private hospitals, homes and clinics as a group is available and published annually in "Private hospitals, homes and clinics registered under section 23 of the Registered Homes Act 1984", copies of which are available in the Library. For the last two years, information is presented separately for private hospitals and clinics and for private nursing homes. Additional information on private hospitals can be found in the annual survey of "Acute Hospitals in the Independent Sector with Psychiatric Hospitals Supplement" by the Independent Healthcare Association.

Elective Surgery

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what assessment he has made of the levels of elective surgery performed in the private sector *(a)* by region and *(b)* nationally in each of the last five years; [29184]

(2) what was the amount of elective surgery performed in the private sector privately as a percentage of NHS elective surgery *(a)* by region and *(b)* nationally in each of the last 10 years. [29185]

Mr. Malone: Information on elective surgery performed in the private sector is not collected centrally. Information on the volume of elective and emergency admissions in NHS hospitals is contained in the annual publication "Hospitals Episode Statistics", copies of which are available in the Library.

Cost Rent Schemes

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many cost rent schemes have been agreed *(a)* in London and *(b)* outside London in each of the last 10 years. [29187]

Mr. Malone: Information is available for only 1994–95 and relates to cost rent projects agreed in principle by health authorities. Details will be placed in the Library.

Human Embyros

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many embryos have been frozen under the provisions of licences issued by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority since its establishment; and in how many of those cases storage facilities are no longer able to trace the parents of that embryo. [28999]

Mr. Horam: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave her on 25 March, columns *421-22*. Statistics about contacts between licensed centres and patients are not available centrally.

Private Finance (General Practitioner Premises)

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about private finance in respect of general practitioner premises. [29188]

Ms Horam: The primary care sector of the national health service has always used private capital to fund the development of general practitioner premises.

Health Authority Expenditure

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the per capita expenditure by each health authority area in each of the last three years for which information is available. [29070]

Mr. Horam: I refer the hon. Member to the reply my right hon. Friend the Minister for Health gave the hon. Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn) on 26 May 1994, column *305* and the reply my right hon. Friend the then Secretary for Health gave the hon. Member for Darlington on 12 December 1994, column *465*, for per capita spend for each district health authority in 1992–93 and 1993–94.

Per capita spend for each district health authority in 1994–95 will be placed in the Library.

Comparisons of these per capita spend figures need to be treated with caution. First, not all the expenditure covered arises from population-related activities. Secondly, crude populations do not reflect differences in age structure or relative health care need. These differences feature in the formulae used to inform the main allocations to the former district health authorities.

Adoption Rules (Foreign Children)

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what are the rules governing transfer of consent by the natural parents on cases of adoption of foreign national children; and what assessment he has made of the compliance of the procedures in the case about which he has been informed with those rules. [29190]

Mr. Bowis: Where an adoption application has been made to a court in England and Wales in accordance with the Adoption Act 1976, the court may not make an adoption order unless it is satisfied that the child is free for adoption and that agreement of the parent or guardian to the adoption has been obtained. Before making an adoption order, section 16 of the 1976 Act requires the court to satisfy itself that such consent has been given freely and with full understanding of what is involved and that each parent has agreed unconditionally to the making of the adoption order.

Rules of court require that a guardian ad litem be appointed by the court in any case where consent is not given or there are special circumstances. In cases of consent, a reporting officer will be appointed. If he has any doubt about the validity of the consent, the court will consider whether to appoint a guardian. In the High Court, this is the official solicitor unless he declines to act or one of the parties objects. It is the duty of the guardian ad litem to investigate the application and prepare a report for the court.

Parental agreement to the making of an adoption order may be dispensed with by the court in certain prescribed circumstances. These provisions apply to all adoption applications irrespective of the country of origin of the child concerned. Similar provisions apply in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Read Codes System

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 2 May, *Official Report*, column *608*, if he will list each hospital participating in the development of the Read codes project; which aspects of its application each hospital was deemed to be piloting; and when each pilot project was due to start and finish. [28935]

Mr. Horam *[holding answer 10 May 1996]:* The hospitals concerned have requested that their details are not divulged until the project has been completed.

OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION

Know-how Fund

33. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what new proposals he has to extend the work of the know-how fund in the Baltic states. [27700]

Mr. Hanley: We are starting a regional project covering all three Baltic states in public administration development. Through this and other initiatives, the know-how fund will continue to provide rapid and flexible assistance to the reform process in the Baltic states. The countries concerned very much welcome our support.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what occasion and in relation to which contracts, contracts sponsored under the know-how fund in Moscow in the last five years were allocated and subsequently extended without being the subject of tendering or re-tendering procedures. [29237]

Mr. Hanley: Of the 1,574 contracts the know-how fund has issued over the last five years, 1,256 contracts were awarded without a requirement to tender. This includes contracts issued to nominated individuals, low-value contracts where the costs of a competition would outweigh potential savings, and cost-sharing contracts.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if he will list the United Kingdom contractors and consultants who have been engaged on know-how fund sponsored food distribution projects and training projects in Moscow during the last five years; [29235]

(2) on what occasions and in relation to which contracts United Kingdom contractors and consultants who have been engaged on know-how fund sponsored contracts in the last five years were given such contracts without a requirement to tender; [29236]

(3) if he will list the projects funded during the last five years by the know-how fund relating to *(a)* food distribution in Moscow and *(b)* training in Moscow. [29234]

Mr. Hanley: The answers could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Nigeria

Sir Michael Grylls: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what date the British high commissioner returned to Nigeria; what steps he is taking to encourage the restoration of democracy in that country; and on what date he expects the Nigerian high commissioner to return to London. [29010]

Mr. Hanley: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Stretford (Mr. Lloyd) on 19 February, column *22*. The Nigerian authorities have given us no indication of a date for the return of the Nigerian high commissioner to London.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had, and with whom, on the current regime in Nigeria. [28600]

Mr. Hanley: We continue to consult closely with Commonwealth, European Union and other partners on all aspects of our policy towards Nigeria.

Human Rights Monitors (Africa)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the number of British sponsored and financed human rights monitors in Africa; and if he will list the countries in which they are working. [28599]

Mr. Hanley: UN human rights monitors are deployed in Rwanda and Burundi.

Rwanda has 101 human rights monitors in the field. The UK is the largest bilateral donor and has contributed £3 million since 1995 towards the cost of the operation. The UK also contributes through the European Union, which is funding 11 of the UN monitors, rising to 27 at the end of May.

In Burundi the first four UN monitors, funded by the European Union, were deployed in April 1996.

Land Mines

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assistance is being provided to *(a)* agencies involved in demining and *(b)* the victims of land mines; and if he will make a statement. [27697]

Mr. Hanley: Since April 1993, the ODA has funded mine clearing operations totalling nearly £17 million, including the UK share of European Community-funded projects. Details of these commitments have been placed in the Library of the House.

We recognise the need for both post-trauma and longer-term assistance to land mine victims. We support medical care and rehabilitation through contributions to the International Committee of the Red Cross and non-governmental organisations. Longer-term needs to promote self-help and economic independence are addressed through country development programmes.

Vector-borne Diseases (Iraq)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of vector-borne diseases in Iraq with particular reference to *(a)* malaria and *(b)* visceral leishmaniasis. [27764]

Mr. Hanley: We have not been invited to undertake an assessment of either malaria or visceral leishmaniasis in Iraq. An intensive spraying programme in northern Iraq, funded by the European Community, led to a dramatic decrease in malaria, from 65,000 cases in 1994 to 38,000 in 1995. No deaths have been reported. We understand that there are sufficient stocks of insecticide for 1996. Available information suggests that there was a decrease in leishmaniasis between 1992 and 1994—the last year for which we have information.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Coal Stocks

Mr. Battle: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what tonnages of stockpiled coal are presently held by *(a)* Powergen, *(b)* National Power, *(c)* Scottish Power, *(d)* British Steel and *(e)* private mine owners. [27301]

Mr. Page: Latest available data are for the end of February 1996 when stocks of coal held by electricity generators totalled 7,413,000 tonnes, stocks at coke ovens totalled 1,155,000 tonnes, and stocks at collieries and opencast sites totalled 5,984,000 tonnes. Figures for individual companies are commercially sensitive and cannot be disclosed.

Fireworks

Mr. Battle: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans he has to change existing legislation regarding the sale of aerial shell fireworks to the public. [27299]

Mr. John M. Taylor: On 28 March, I announced that my Department would be undertaking a comprehensive review of the voluntary and legislative measures dealing with the availability of fireworks to the public. The review will consider, among other issues, the current classification system of fireworks including the treatment of aerial shells. My Department will seek views from a wide range of interested organisations during the summer and I will then consider possible was in which the current measures might be improved.

Industrial Death and Retirement Fund

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade,if he will place in the Library copies of the documentation held by his Department relating to the industrial death and retirement fund. [28888]

Mr. Page: British Coal remains liable to meet all entitlements under the industrial death and retirement scheme—which closed in January 1995. I understand that the chairman has written to the hon. Member previously explaining British Coal's disclosure practice and, given the essentially commercial nature of the arrangements, it would not be appropriate to make these papers more generally available.

Telecommunications Industry (Intellectual Property)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade, pursuant to the letter of 19 February from the Under-Secretary of State for Science and Technology, what action he is taking in European Telecommunications Standards Institute for the publication of the de facto standards in relation to intellectual property in the telecommunications industry; and if he will make a statement. [27933]

Mr. Ian Taylor: The European Telecommunications Standards Institute is the main body in Europe producing telecommunications standards. It has a membership of some 30 Governments and 370 private and public telecommunications companies.

DTI officials have held various elected positions in the institute and in this capacity have been pursuing the idea that ETSI should be ready to publish not only its own standards but those that are drafted elsewhere, including de facto standards. This concept was agreed last year and incorporated in ETSI's new rules of procedure on 19 April this year.

Such publication should ensure that essential intellectual property is available on fair and non-discriminatory terms. The publication of a particular de facto standard depends though on the willingness of the originator to submit it for publication in this way and it is too early to say whether this will, in fact, be widely accepted.

Energy Council

Mr. Day: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on the outcome of the EC Energy Council held on 7 May. [28845]

Mr. Eggar: The Council considered several issues and received reports on matters of interest. I represented the UK.

The Council made some limited progress on electricity market liberalisation. Ministers agreed the broad framework for opening up electricity markets to competition and undertook to continue discussions on the extent and pace of market opening. I hope that we can

make further progress in the coming weeks with a view to reaching a final decision at at an extraordinary Council meeting before the end of the Italian Presidency.

The Council also reached political agreement on the key elements of the Commission's proposal for a second programme, aimed at encouraging best use of energy efficiency technology which will help reduce CO_2 emissions. A five-year programme with a budget of 45 mecu was agreed.

The Council reached agreement on a resolution on the European energy policy White Paper. Broadly, this invites the Commission to continue its existing activities in the energy field; to organise co-operation on energy policy objectives and energy studies; to report on transparency measures and to present proposals from the indicative work programme on the basis of existing treaties and competences.

Also, the Council agreed conclusions on a Commission report on gas supply and prospects. These invite the Commission to continue to examine the issues raised in the report, bring forward proposals if necessary and report back to the Council in two years' time.

Council conclusions were agreed on the energy aspects of the Barcelona Euro-Mediterranean conference which identified energy as having a pivotal role in economic co-operation especially in terms of investment and the activities of companies in extending networks. The conclusions look forward to a conference of energy ministers in Trieste on 8 to 9 June—preceded by a day involving the industry on 7 June—to discuss possible participation in the energy charter treaty, implementation of trans-european energy projects and definition of priorities for future action.

The Council held a discussion on the SYNERGY proposal which involves a multi-annual financial support programme over five years to help non-member countries in the definition, formulation and implementation of energy policy. Work on this dossier will continue.

In addition, the Council received presentations from the Commission on its reports on civil protection, tourism and energy, as requested by declaration 1 to the treaty of the European Union, and on the oil supply and refining markets as well as progress reports on the energy charter treaty and the draft directive on integrated resource planning.

Mid-Kent Holdings Plc

Dame Peggy Fenner: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will maintain the legal undertakings given by General Utilities plc to the then President of Board of Trade in March 1991 regarding its interests in Mid-Kent Holdings. [29155]

Mr. John M. Taylor: General Utilities gave undertakings to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on 21 March 1991. Since then, no decision has been made to vary the undertakings or to release General Utilities from them. The undertakings therefore remain legally binding.

Mr. Rowe: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment he has made of the effects on the Government's competition policy of the judgment of Mr. Justice Knox in the Chancery Division of the High Court in the case of Mid-Kent Holdings plc delivered on 30 April; and if he will make a statement. [29007]

Mr. Taylor: I will study carefully the judgment given by Mr. Justice Knox in the above case. It would, however, be inappropriate for me to give a view on whether and to what extent the Government's competition policy affected this judgment.

Business Links

Mr. Harvey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will list *(a)* the names, *(b)* the dates of report and *(c)* the dates of publication of each departmental study of business links; and if he will make a statement. [28534]

Mr. Page: The main departmental studies on business links that have been carried out so far are:

DTI: Evaluation of Business Link; Report by KPMG Peat Marwick; published in April 1994

Evaluation of Business Links; Report by Ernst and Young; published in February 1996

The Government have an on-going programme of assessing business links. This includes gathering quarterly monitoring information, measuring the awareness perceptions and use of business links by businesses through bi-annual surveys and assessing the quality of information and services received by business through a mystery shopper exercise. In addition, we plan to carry out further evaluation studies of businesses links later this year and in 1997.

Biotechnological Inventions (Legal Protection)

Mr. Ingram: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on the EU draft directive on legal protection of biotechnological inventions. [29002]

Mr. Ian Taylor: The Commission's proposal for an EC directive on the legal protection of biotechnological inventions is the subject of explanatory memorandum 4519/96 submitted on 4 March 1996 and available in the Library of the House.

The proposal is currently under discussion before the Council. A first opinion of the European Parliament is not expected until this autumn.

AEA Technology Restructuring Fund

Mr. Ingram: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what was the total amount allocated by the Government to the AEA Technology restructuring fund up to 31 March to prepare the company for privatisation. [29000]

Mr. Eggar: Until 31 March 1996, AEA Technology was a division of the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority. In respect of UKAEA restructuring, I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the President of Board of Trade, on 6 February 1996, *Official Report*, columns *144–45*, which provides the most recent information on funding. Restructuring of UKAEA has been going on since the late 1980s and reflects the changing role of the authority and changes in its external business environment.

Global Free Trade

Mr. Redwood: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what action he is proposing to pursue the goal of global free trade. [28913]

Mr. Nelson: The Government envisage three main stages in the pursuit of global free trade. First, the ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organisation in Singapore in December 1996 should set in train a comprehensive work programme to carry forward the process of liberalisation, building on the achievements of the Uruguay round. Secondly, a new multilateral negotiating round should be launched in the WTO before the end of the decade, to be concluded and implemented early in the next century. Thirdly, the WTO should set itself a firm date for achieving the ultimate goal of global free trade by 2020. My right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade set out his views on these issues in a speech given to the British American Chamber of Commerce on 30 April, a copy of which I have arranged to be placed in the Library of the House.

Business Link Network Ltd.

Mrs. Roche: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is *(a)* the DTI's involvement with and *(b)* the status of the Business Link Network Ltd. [28746]

Mr. Page: The Business Link Network Ltd. has recently been established by the business links national partners, including the TEC National Council, British chambers of commerce, the National Federation of Enterprise Agencies and local authority associations, to provide a range of practical support services to help business links to deliver a better service to the business community. Plans include the bulk purchase of insurance and other common services, dissemination of good practice and the development of a national business link presence on the Internet.

The DTI is in discussion with the Business Link Network Ltd. about possible areas for collaboration.

Scottish and Newcastle Breweries

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the President of the Board of Trade on how many occasions in the last two years he has received communications from hon. Members relating to the interests of Scottish and Newcastle Breweries. [29233]

Mr. John M. Taylor: My right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade and ministerial colleagues have answered 23 separate letters or parliamentary questions, all of which relate to the acquisition by Scottish and Newcastle of Courage and the new company formed after the merger, Scottish Courage. In addition, three early-day motions were tabled and an Adjournment debate was held in January 1996.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Mature Students

Mr. Byers: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people aged 65 years or over were engaged in full or part-time education in *(a)* 1990 and *(b)* the latest year for which information is available; and what percentage each represents of the relevant age group. [28127]

Mrs. Gillan *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* The figures are given in the tables.

Students aged 65 and over, 1990–91 and 1994–95, England

	1990–91	*1994–95*
Higher education	8,127	11,782
Open University	n/a	2,441
Further education	165,000	122,000

Participation rate: percentage of population aged 65 and over

	1990–91	*1994–95*
Higher education	0.1	0.2
Open University	n/a	0.0
Further education	2.2	1.6
Total	2.3	1.8

A considerable number of people aged 65 and over attend adult education centres; no estimate is available. The decrease in numbers in further education since 1990–91 is due mainly to fewer students taking non-examinable courses; the number enrolled for examinable courses has increased sharply.
n/a not available.

Assisted Places Scheme

Sir Alan Haselhurst: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will extend the assisted places scheme to schools catering exclusively for children with special educational needs. [28350]

Mrs. Gillan: We have no present plans to do so, but are keeping the matter under review.

Statemented Pupils

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will list by local education authority *(a)* the total number and *(b)* the percentage of pupils who are currently statmented. [28523]

Mrs. Gillan: The latest available information is shown in the table:

Pupils with a statement of special educational needs in schools by local education authority area

England *January 1995*

	Pupils with a statement of SEN	*Percentage*[1]
Corporation of London	0	0.0
Camden	837	2.9
Greenwich	1,369	3.6
Hackney	873	2.9
Hammersmith and Fulham	662	3.3
Islington	827	3.3
Kensington and Chelsea	242	1.2
Lambeth	848	3.0
Lewisham	1,050	2.9
Southwark	929	2.4
Tower Hamlets	1,089	3.0
Wandsworth	1,220	3.6
Westminster	373	1.6
Barking and Dagenham	559	2.0
Barnet	915	1.8
Bexley	858	2.3

Pupils with a statement of special educational needs in schools by local education authority area

England *January 1995*

	Pupils with a statement of SEN	*Percentage*[1]
Brent	736	1.9
Bromley	1,221	2.6
Croydon	864	1.6
Ealing	755	1.6
Enfield	666	1.5
Haringey	627	1.9
Harrow	643	2.0
Havering	810	2.2
Hillingdon	1,135	2.9
Hounslow	1,012	2.8
Kingston upon Thames	507	2.2
Merton	551	2.0
Newham	990	2.3
Redbridge	676	1.7
Richmond upon Thames	497	1.9
Sutton	694	2.5
Waltham Forest	986	2.8
Birmingham	4,327	2.3
Coventry	1,084	2.0
Dudley	923	1.9
Sandwell	814	1.5
Solihull	746	1.9
Walsall	1,294	2.6
Wolverhampton	1,095	2.4
Knowsley	910	3.0
Liverpool	2,512	2.9
St. Helens	1,430	4.6
Sefton	1,468	2.8
Wirral	1,570	2.7
Bolton	1,054	2.1
Bury	1,042	3.3
Manchester	1,523	2.0
Oldham	607	1.4
Rochdale	876	2.4
Salford	723	1.8
Stockport	1,536	3.1
Tameside	1,034	2.7
Trafford	742	2.0
Wigan	1,933	3.8
Barnsley	996	2.8
Doncaster	1,931	3.6
Rotherham	1,374	3.0
Sheffield	1,761	2.3
Bradford	1,639	1.7
Calderdale	679	1.9
Kirklees	2,113	3.2
Leeds	3,510	2.9
Wakefield	1,244	2.2
Gateshead	588	1.8
Newcastle upon Tyne	1,259	2.7
North Tyneside	1,035	3.1
South Tyneside	656	2.4
Sunderland	1,561	3.0
Isles of Scilly	4	1.4
Avon	4,341	2.8
Bedfordshire	2,425	2.5
Berkshire	3,591	2.7
Buckinghamshire	3,336	3.0
Cambridge	2,718	2.5
Cheshire	5,140	3.1
Cleveland	2,524	2.4
Cornwall	2,908	4.0
Cumbria	3,205	4.0
Derbyshire	5,251	3.4
Devon	5,338	3.4
Dorset	2,470	2.5
Durham	2,942	2.9
East Sussex	3,534	3.4
Essex	5,492	2.3
Gloucestershire	2,282	2.6
Hampshire	7,739	3.2
Hereford and Worcester	2,608	2.3

Pupils with a statement of special educational needs in schools by local education authority area

England *January 1995*

	Pupils with a statement of SEN	*Percentage*[1]
Hertfordshire	4,599	2.6
Humberside	3,222	2.2
Isle of Wight	487	2.5
Kent	7,256	2.8
Lancashire	7,815	3.3
Leicestershire	3,683	2.4
Lincolnshire	3,048	3.2
Norfolk	3,759	3.3
North Yorkshire	2,616	2.3
Northamptonshire	2,316	2.2
Northumberland	1,155	2.2
Nottinghamshire	1,932	1.1
Oxfordshire	1,875	2.0
Shropshire	2,449	3.5
Somerset	1,947	2.6
Staffordshire	4,543	2.6
Suffolk	3,049	2.9
Surrey	5,074	3.1
Warwickshire	1,771	2.2
West Sussex	2,598	2.4
Wiltshire	2,624	2.9
England	211,307	2.6

[1] Pupils with a statement of special education needs expressed as a percentage of the school population.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will list by local education authority the number and percentage of currently statemented pupils statemented at *(a)* key stage 1 and *(b)* key stage 2. [28525]

Mrs. Gillan: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will list by local education authority the amount per special educational needs pupils spent on special needs education in 1995–96. [28524]

Mrs. Gillan: The data collected centrally identify expenditure on statemented pupils and on special schools, but do not identify separately expenditure on other forms of provision for special educational needs.

Mr. Havey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will list by local education authority the percentage of currently statemented pupils who are statemented for *(a)* physical disability and *(b)* severe learning difficulties. [28526]

Mrs. Gillan: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Teacher Training

Mr. Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was *(a)* the target for 1996 and *(b)* the actual intake for primary teacher training in 1995. [28587]

Mr. Robin Squire: The primary target for England for 1996–97 is 11,500. The actual intake to primary teacher training in 1995–96 was 13,601.

Statutory Instruments

Mr. Spearing: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what amended orders she proposes to lay arising from the recommendations contained in the 15th report of the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments (HC 34-xv, HL 60 of Session 1995–96); and what is her timetable for laying these orders. [28628]

Mr. Robin Squire *[holding answer 10 May 1996]:* The 15th report of the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments refers to two sets of regulations made by the Department, the Education (Grants for Nursery Education) (England) Regulations 1996, SI 1996/353, and the Education (Grants for Education Support and Training: Nursery Education) (England) Regulations 1996, SI 1996/235.

In the case of SI 1996/353, the Committee, after calling for two memorandums from the Department, determined not to draw the special attention of both Houses to the regulations. In the case of SI 1996/235, the Committee drew the special attention of both Houses to the regulations on the ground that they included two provisions which referred to provisions in another instrument rather than setting the provisions out in full. Since the instrument is unambiguous and contains no error, it does not call for amendment. The Department therefore does not propose to lay any amending regulations arising from this report but will bear in mind the Joint Committee's views on drafting in future.

Expulsion

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance she has issued on the grounds which are justifiable for the expulsion of a child from school; and if she will make a statement. [28977]

Mr. Robin Squire: Guidance was issued by the Department in May 1994 to heads, governing bodies and local education authorities on the proper use of exclusion. It indicated that exclusion should be used sparingly—as a last resort—in response to serious breaches of school policy or law.

Competitiveness and Deregulation Policy

Mr. John Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will make a statement on the implications of her competitiveness and deregulation policy for job prospects in the United Kingdom in relation to those in other EU countries. [27678]

Mr. Forth: International evidence shows that keeping regulation to a necessary minimum allows employers to create a diverse pattern of jobs, giving workers greater choice in when and how to work. This leads to more people in employment. The latest available figures indicate that, in 1994, the UK had a higher proportion of its population of working age in employment than any other major EU member state.

Interview Expenses

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what assessment has been made by her Department of the impact of lengthening the qualifying period for the payment of expenses for attending job interviews; and what assessment has been made of the benefits of the scheme; [29003]

(2) how much her Department has spent in each of the last three years in meeting the expenses incurred by unemployed people in attending job interviews; and how much her Department expects to save as a result of recent changes in the unemployment qualifying period for the payments of travelling expenses for attending job interviews. [29004]

Mr. Forth: Responsibility for the subject of the questions has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its chief executive. I have asked for him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Mike Fogden to Mr. Brian Donohoe, dated 13 May 1996:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your questions to her about the payment of expenses for attending job interviews. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

The ES provides financial assistance to unemployed people attending job interviews beyond their normal daily travelling distance through the Travel to Interview Scheme (TIS).

The performance of TIS is assessed on a regular basis to provide information which will improve the effectiveness of the scheme in helping unemployed people back into work. Management information is collected quarterly to monitor the operation of the programme and latest figures show that in 1995–96 the scheme helped 46,810 people with travel costs.

A full evaluation of TIS has also been carried out. This examined, in more detail, various aspects of the operation and impact of the programme. The evaluation was not designed to assess the impact of lengthening the qualifying period for payment. However, the report does contain some information about the impact of TIS on people with different unemployment durations. If you would like to see the full detail of this study, copies can be obtained through the House of Commons library.

Over the last three financial years the cost of meeting the expenses incurred by unemployed clients to attend job interviews have been.

1993–94 £1.79 million enabling 50,373 interviews

1994–95 £1.8 million enabling 51,140 interviews

1995–96 £1.7 million enabling 46,810 interviews

As the figures show, the demand for TIS has fallen over the last 12 months. However, we will not be able to compare savings made through the introduction of the 13 week measures until we have collected statistics at the end of June and compared them with the corresponding quarter last year. I will write to you again in August when that comparison has been carried out.

I hope this is helpful.

Objective 4 Status

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment she has made of the amount of money which would be available to British firms *(a)* in total, *(b)* with fewer than 100 employees, *(c)* with fewer than 50 employees and *(d)* with fewer than 10 employees, from the European Union if Britain had applied for objective 4 status.[28748]

Mr. Forth: The amount of support available under any objectives depends on the terms of the programme, which is agreed with the Commission in respect of that objective. Since the Government have not negotiated such an agreement in relation to objective 4, it is impossible to estimate which firms would be eligible.

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate she has made of the number of British firms *(a)* in total, *(b)* with fewer than 100 employees, *(c)* with fewer than 50 employees and *(d)* with fewer than 10 employees, which would be eligible for European Union aid under objective 4.[28749]

Mr. Forth: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave earlier.

Education Council

Mr. French: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the outcome of the Council of EC Education Ministers held on 6 May. [29513]

Mr. Forth: On 6 May, the Council of EC Education Ministers adopted conclusions on the European Commission White Paper "Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society" and held a public debate on this topic. The Council also adopted conclusions on the synergies between academic recognition and professional recognition of qualifications within the community and a resolution on multimedia educational software.

Ministers received information from the European Commission on the assessment of quality of higher and non-higher education; the European Year of Lifelong learning; co-operation with third countries; the progress of work on the forthcoming Commission green paper on obstacles to mobility; and the Commission publication "Key Data on Education in the European Union 1995". Ministers received a communication from the Greek delegation about the proposed European centre classical literature and were briefed by the presidency on the outcome of the conference on "Cultural Diversity and Social Integration" held in Turin on 11 to 13 April 1996.

A copy of the official minutes of the Council will be placed in the Library when they become available.

School Security

Mr. French: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when she will publish the report of the working group on school security. [29514]

Mr. Robin Squire: The report will be published tomorrow morning, and I shall place copies in the Library.

Footballers' Work Permits

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the outcome of her recent discussions with the football authorities in respect of the issue of work permits to footballers from other countries *(a)* entering the United Kingdom to play for a British Club and *(b)* being transferred between British Clubs; and if she will make a statement. [22383]

Mrs. Gillan: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) on 18 March 1996, *Official Report*, column *37*.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Archdeacons

37. **Mr. Harry Greenway:** To ask the right hon. Member for Selby, representing the Church Commissioners, how many *(a)* male and *(b)* female archdeacons are currently paid by the Church Commissioners; at what stipend and emoluments; and if he will make a statement. [27704]

Mr. Alison: Most archdeacons receive their stipend from money raised by their diocese which is paid through the commissioners' payroll. At the end of April 1996, there were 104 male archdeacons and one female archdeacon on the payroll. The stipend recommended by the Church Commissioners, as Central Stipends Authority, is £20,860 per annum.

Investment Income and Expenditure

39. **Sir Sydney Chapman:** To ask the right hon. Member for Selby, representing the Church Commissioners, if he will make a statement on the Church Commissioners' investment income and expenditure in 1995. [27706]

Mr. Alison: The commissioners' investment income in 1995 was £137 million, a yield of 6.1 per cent. compared with 6.2 per cent. in 1994 based on the WM All Funds' independent assessment of our performance. This reduction is a consequence of rebalancing the portfolio by reducing property and gilts and increasing equities. Total return—that is, income plus capital growth—was 19.5 per cent. compared to the WM All Funds' benchmark of 19.1 per cent.

Expenditure was £143 million. The two main items of expenditure were £77 million for clergy pensions, which are currently paid in full by the commissioners, and £42 million for clergy stipends.

TRANSPORT

Sea Empress Incident

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he expects the report on the damage suffered by the Sea Empress to be made available to the marine accident investigation branch; and if he will place a copy in the Library. [28903]

Mr. Norris: The marine accident investigation branch will be conducting its own assessment of the damage to the Sea Empress. The vessel has only just become available for inspection following the cleaning operation in dry dock in Belfast and MAIB's findings will form part of its report into the accident and salvage operation. The MAIB report will be published and copies will be placed in the Library.

Heavy Goods Vehicle Licences

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what provisions apply to people suffering from insulin dependent diabetes in respect of holding HGV licences; and if he will make a statement. [28596]

Mr. Norris: People with diabetes subject to insulin treatment are prohibited from holding a large goods vehicle driver's licence, with the exception of certain drivers who already held such a licence on 1 April 1991.

Foamix

Mr. Jacques Arnold: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he expects the application of R. J. Maxwell Ltd. for accreditation of its product Foamix to be formally approved by the Highways Authorities and Utilities Committee. [28953]

Mr. Watts: This matter is due to be discussed at the next meeting of the full committee on 16 May. I shall write to my hon. Friend advising him of the outcome.

WALES

Milford Haven

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he received a request from the Countryside Council for Wales to issue a holding direction on the application by Milford Haven port authority to construct a jetty to import orimulsion and limestone for Pembroke power station; and if he will make a statement. [29196]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The request was received on 15 April and is being considered, along with requests that the application be called in.

European Regional Development Fund

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the European regional development fund projects approved under the Rural Wales 5b programme in 1995–96, indicating in each case their total eligible costs, the grant originally allocated to each project, the date each sponsor was informed of the actual grant available and how much grant was spent by 31 March. [28950]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: Under the objective 5(b) rural Wales single programming document 1994–1999, 250 projects had been approved to receive European regional development fund grant assistance by 31 March 1996. The lists of selected projects and estimated individual grant amounts were published in Welsh Office press notices dated 24 August 1995, 5 February 1996 and 18 March 1996 and copies are available in the Library of the House. ERDF grant totalling around £36.7 million had been committed on projects with estimated eligible costs of £131.6 million, of which £5.8 million grant has been paid on expenditure up to 31 January 1996. The dates on which approval letters were issued will vary in each individual case.

European Funding

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) if he will list the European regional development fund projects approved under the Leader II programme in 1995–96, indicating in each case their total eligible costs, the grant originally allocated to each project, the date each sponsor was informed of the actual grant available and how much grant was spent by 31 March; [28948]

(2) if he will list the total grant aid available for European regional development fund projects under Leader II and Rural Wales 5b programmes and European agricultural guidance and guarantee fund projects under Leader II and Rural Wales 5b programmes in 1995–96 from the Welsh Development Agency; if he will indicate the budget for these programmes from the Welsh Development Agency in 1996–97; and if he will make a statement; [28952]

(3) if he will list the European agricultural guidance and guarantee fund projects approved under the Leader II programme in 1995–96, indicating in each case their total eligible costs, the grant originally allocated to each project, the date each sponsor was informed of the actual grant available and how much grant was spent by 31 March. [28951]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: I will write to the hon. Member as soon as possible and place a copy of my reply in the Library of the House.

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the European agricultural guidance and guarantee fund projects approved under the rural Wales programme in 1995–96, indicating in each case their total eligible costs, the grant originally allocated to each project, the date each sponsor was informed of the actual grant available and how much grant was spent by 31 March. [28947]

Mr. Jones: Under the objective 5(b) rural Wales single programming document 1994–1999, 52 projects had been approved to receive European agricultural guidance and guarantee fund grant assistance by March 1996. The lists of selected projects and estimated individual grant amounts were published in Welsh Office press notices dated 24 August 1995 and 5 February 1996 and copies are available in the Library of the House. EAGGF grant totalling around £6.09 million had been committed on projects with estimated eligible costs of £14.4 million, of which £1.07 million grant has been paid on expenditure up to 31 January 1996. The dates on which approval letters were issued will vary in each individual case.

Weather Data

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) if he will place a copy of the weather data from the Countryside Council for Wales meteorological station at Deer park, Marloes, Pembrokeshire, for February in the Library; [29171]

(2) if he will place a copy of the weather data from the Countryside Council of Wales wave rider buoy in St. Bride's bay, for February in the Library. [29172]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: I will arrange for copies to be placed in the Library of the House as soon as possible.

Rural Wales Projects

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the total grant in aid available from the Welsh Development Agency to projects in rural Wales in 1995–96 and the budget allocated for similar projects in 1996–97; and if he will make a statement. [28949]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The Welsh Development Agency's programmes support economic development throughout the whole of the agency's area; with the exception of the specific rural development programme expenditure in rural and non-rural areas is not identified separately. The agency's specific rural development programme budget for 1995–96 was £6.8 million with a forecast outturn of £6.0 million; the budget for 1996–97 is £2.5 million but, in addition, there is significant

expenditure in rural areas through the main property and environmental capital programmes and support for the encouragement of businesses.

Rate Relief Scheme

Mr. Sweeney: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on his proposals for a new rate relief scheme targeted on general stores and post offices in villages, as announced in the White Paper, "A Working Countryside for Wales". [29511]

Mr. Hague: The consultation paper I have published today sets out the proposals I promised in the White Paper "A Working Countryside for Wales" to help sustain village shops and post offices.

These proposals will provide significant help to the small general stores and post offices which are a feature of village life and which provide an invaluable service to local people. Many small general stores and post offices will in future be entitled to at least 50 per cent. relief on their business rates. Local authorities will have discretion to top this up to 100 per cent. Local authorities will also have wide discretion to reduce the rates bills of other rural businesses, thereby helping to safeguard rural communities and preserve the fabric of village life.

LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

EU Documents

Mr. Spearing: To ask the Lord President of the Council at which public libraries explanatory memorandums relating to documents considered by the Council of the European Community are regularly deposited; and by what other means members of the public are currently advised of the publication of such memorandums. [27118]

Mr. Newton: Explanatory memorandums are regularly deposited with four depository libraries in the United Kingdom. These are the lending and reference divisions of the British Library in Wetherby and London, the City of Westminster central reference library, and the Liverpool and District scientific, industrial and research library. Explanatory memorandums can also be obtained direct from Government Departments. Members of the public may obtain advice and information about European Union matters, including where to obtain copies of explanatory memorandums, through the national network of public information relays established throughout the United Kingdom by the European Commission. This includes European information centres, European documentation centres, European reference centres, public library authorities as well as a number of national organisations including the Local Government Information Bureau, the Confederation of British Industry, the Trades Union Congress and citizens' advice bureaux.

Drugs Strategy

Mr. Rathbone: To ask the Lord President of the Council what progress has been made in implementing the Government's "Tackling Drugs Together" strategy; and if he will make a statement. [28989]

Mr. Newton: The Government's drugs strategy for England for the period 1995–98, "Tackling Drugs Together", was published on 10 May 1995. While fully maintaining the emphasis on law enforcement and reducing supply, the strategy recognises the need for stronger action on reducing the demand for illegal drugs. Separate action is under way in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, consistent with the strategy for England, but tailored to the particular circumstances in those countries.

Some 49 tasks were set for Government Departments and statutory agencies in implementing the strategy during 1995–96. All have been undertaken and, where appropriate, completed. In particular:

- all police forces are publishing drugs strategies which combine law enforcement, demand reduction and partnership measures;
- research into the nature and incidence of drug-related crime is underway;
- HM Customs and Excise has reviewed its anti-drugs effort, and resources allocated to its investigation and intelligence work has been increased;
- the National Criminal Intelligence Service has reviewed its operations and is working more closely with the police and Customs;
- co-operation between the police and Customs has been enhanced, with performance indicators set for 1996–97 covering the full range of drugs law enforcement—and, for the first time, a joint press conference announced collective results in 1995;
- each probation service is developing a drugs strategy in line with guidance from the Home Office and Association of Chief Officers of Probation;
- all prison establishments have developed local drugs strategies—focusing on supply control, demand reduction and treatment—in line with the national strategy, using trained multi-disciplinary teams of staff;
- mandatory drug testing has been successfully implemented in all prison establishments;
- a first phase of drug treatment pilot schemes, involving 22 prisons, has been introduced;
- practical guidelines for local criminal justice drug prevention programmes have been issued for consultation—six collaborative projects are putting the guidelines into practice;
- funding of £5.9 million has delivered 16 innovative drug education projects and enhanced teacher training;
- guidance on managing drug-related incidents and drug education has been sent to all schools, with local policies being developed accordingly;
- information about drug education teaching materials and resources has been made available to schools;
- the Office for Standards in Education is monitoring the response by schools and others, including specific studies of drugs education and the contribution of the youth service to drugs prevention;
- consultations with further and higher education bodies have been undertaken to encourage effective prevention, counselling and support services;
- a three year national publicity campaign targeted at young people and parents run by the Health Education Authority, costing £5 million a year, has been launched;
- an increasing number of private companies have become involved in working nationally and locally on drugs prevention;
- £1.1 million has been used on 40 projects for early intervention services for young people at risk of drug misuse;
- a review of substance misuse services for young people has been published by the Health Advisory Service;

the consultation phase on improving the health and safety of young people at clubs and other venues is nearing completion;

a four-year work programme has been agreed for the drugs prevention initiative;

the 24-hour free national drugs helpline service has answered 192,755 calls in its first year;

a national drugs information strategy is being developed, in consultation with the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs and other bodies;

the effectiveness review on effective and appropriate treatments reported to Ministers and has now been published, with work in hand to provide guidance to purchasers in the light of the review and other recent findings;

shared care arrangements for drug misusers between primary and secondary health care providers have been reviewed by all health authorities;

contacts have been made with medical and nursing professional and statutory bodies to improve staff training and education.

At regional and local level, the main action has been the establishment of 105 drug action teams across England, and their local community networks—drug reference groups. All teams were established by 30 September 1995, and I agreed all their action plans for 1996–97 and 1997–98 by the beginning of April. Every team comprises senior professionals from the relevant health and local authorities, and police, probation, and (where appropriate) prison services. Some teams also include voluntary sector, business and Customs representatives. All are seeking to encourage these and other groups to engage in practical work to tackle drug misuse on the ground. A digest of examples, drawn from the first action plans, has been published to help on this.

To assist in assessing the effectiveness of the strategy as it develops, baseline information on the key performance indicators set out in "Tackling Drugs Together" is now being collected. The significance of these indicators—and others locally—will be their trends over time. The immense commitment to tackling drug misuse which has been shown across the country—especially among drug action teams—is already very encouraging. The Government will continue to support this work as a high priority, both through the central drugs co-ordination unit and in other ways.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Primary School Pupils

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many pupils are currently enrolled at each primary school in the constituency of Newry and Armagh; and how many were in each primary school in the constituency five years ago. [28079]

Mr. Ancram: The current enrolment and that for five years ago for each primary school in the constituency of Newry and Armagh is in the table.

Primary School	*Enrolment 1991–92*	*Enrolment 1995–96*
Aghavilly primary school, Milford, Armagh	90	80
Ahorey primary school, Portadown	21	[1]—
Anamar primary school, Crossmaglen, Newry	76	74
Annaghmore primary school, Portadown	79	98
Armagh Christian Bros. primary, Keady Road, Armagh	463	458
Armstrong primary school, Armagh	400	384
Bessbrook primary school, Bessbrook, Newry	118	125
Cabra primary school, Tandragee	30	[1]—
Carrickrovaddy primary school, Cullyhanna, Newry	34	36
Clady (St. Michael's) primary school, Mowhan, Armagh	38	45
Clare primary school, Tandragee	69	84
Clay primary school, Keady	70	51
Clonalig primary school, Crossmaglen	181	159
Cloughoge primary school, Newry	379	400
Collone primary school, Collone, Armagh	127	112
Corttamlet primary school, Altnamachin, Newry	39	39
Darkley primary school, Darkley, Armagh	110	155
Derryhale primary school, Portadown	80	62
Drelincourt infants primary, Armagh	43	32
Dromintee primary school, Killeavy, Newry	133	138
Drumhillery primary school, Middletown, Armagh	68	54
Drumsallen primary school, Killylea, Armagh	47	64
Foley primary school, Tassagh, Armagh	102	102
Glassdrummond primary school, Middletown, Armagh	88	76
Hamiltonsbawn primary school, Hamiltonsbawn, Armagh	112	123
Hardy Memorial primary school, Richhill, Armagh	492	506
Jonesborough primary school, Jonesborough, Newry	142	132
Keady primary school, Keady, Armagh	44	44
Killeen primary school, Keady	111	123
Killylea primary school, Armagh	85	64
Kingsmills primary school, Whitecross, Armagh	27	40
Kinnego primary school, Dungannon	23	[1]—
Lisdrumchor primary school, Glenanne, Armagh	27	[1]—
Lisnadill primary school, Armagh	71	96
Lissummon, Newry	[2]—	36
Loughgall primary school, Kilmore, Loughgall	45	24
Markethill primary school, Markethill, Armagh	235	248
Middletown Boys' primary school, Middletown, Armagh	52	52
Mount St. Catherine's Con primary school, Armagh	467	410
Mountnorris primary school, Mountnorris, Armagh	76	91
Mullaghglass primary school, Newry	69	71
Mullavilly primary school, Tandragee	68	90
Newry Model primary school	35	[1]—
Newtownhamilton (St. Michael's) primary school, Newtownhamilton	97	99
Newtownhamilton primary school, Newtownhamilton	119	98

Primary School	Enrolment 1991–92	Enrolment 1995–96
Our Lady's primary school, Keady	43	36
Poyntzpass primary school, Poyntzpass	69	69
Saints and Scholars Integrated primary school, Palace Grounds, Armagh	[2]—	117
St. Brigid's primary school, Crossmaglen, Newry	139	145
St. Bridgid's primary school, Belleeks, Newry	85	77
St. Clare's Convent primary school, Keady, Armagh	248	184
St. Clare's Convent primary school, Newry	654	491
St. Colman's Abbey primary school, Newry	721	515
St. Colman's-Saval primary school, Newry	[2]—	118
St. Colmcille's primary school, Armagh	29	44
St. James' primary school, Drumatee, Markethill	48	65
St. James' primary school, Tandragee	68	55
St. Jarlath's primary school, Blackwaterstown, Dungannon	157	140
St. Joseph's Convent primary, Newry	453	462
St. Joseph's primary, Armagh	133	145
St. Joseph's primary school, Poyntzpass	91	83
St. Joseph's primary school, Killeavy	175	182
St. Joseph's primary school, Bessbrook	406	402
St. Lawrence's primary school, Belleeks, Newry	54	41
St. Louis' Convent primary school, Middletown, Armagh	51	47
St. Malachy's primary school, Whitecross, Armagh	76	63
St. Malachy's primary school, Armagh	210	211
St. Malachy's primary school, Camlough, Newry	283	259
St. Malachy's primary school, Carnagat, Newry	454	450
St. Mary's Boys' primary school, Keady, Armagh	233	152
St. Mary's primary school, Tassagh, Armagh	69	98
St. Mary's primary school, Jerrettspass, Newry	53	69
St. Mary's primary school, Mullaghbawn, Newry	226	211
St. Mochua's primary school, Keady	104	115
St. Oliver Plunkett primary school, Forkhill, Newry	92	122
St. Oliver Plunkett primary school, Kilmore, Armagh	111	100
St. Patrick's Boys' primary school, Rooneys Meadow, Newry	382	311
St. Patrick's primary school, Crossmaglen, Newry	323	282
St. Patrick's primary school, Armagh	533	552
St. Patrick's primary school, Cullyhanna, Newry	282	226
St. Peter's primary school, Cloughreagh, Bessbrook	274	290
St. Ronant's primary school, Newry	[2]—	265
Tandragee primary school, Tandragee	321	314
The Cope primary school, Loughgall, Armagh	113	134
Tullyheron primary school, Mountnorris	48	50
Tullymore primary school, Killyleagh, Armagh	56	62
Tullyroan primary school, Dungannon	40	47
Tullysaran primary school, Armagh	77	81
Windsor Hill primary school, Newry	216	237

[1] Closed or amalgamated.
[2] Not open in 1991–92.

Ulster University

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many new students were enrolled in Ulster university in the present academic year; how many of these students came from the Republic of Ireland; if the enrolment of new students was within the agreed numerical limit; and what assessment he has made of the consequences of this year's enrolment rates for enrolment of new students in the next academic year. [28048]

Mr. Ancram: The number of new full-time under-graduate students enrolled at the university of Ulster in the present academic year was 4,801 of whom 854 were domiciled in the Republic of Ireland.

The limit—maximum aggregate student number MASN—which the university is required to observe is on its total enrolment of award-holding students. There is no specific control on the enrolment of new students. In 1995–96, the MASN was exceeded by 558 students. For the university to remain within its MASN in the next academic year, it will have to make an adjustment to its intakes commensurate with last year's excess.

Carryduff Primary School

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the enrolment in each of the past five years at Carryduff primary school; what is the expected enrolment at the school in each of the next five years; what proposals there are to provide additional accommodation and teaching staff at the school; how many places in primary one will be available in the next academic year; how many applicants there are for places in primary one at the school for the next academic year; and if he will make a statement. [28080]

Mr. Ancram: The enrolment in each of the past five years are in the table.

Year	Number of pupils enrolled
1991–92	293 (at January 1991)
1992–93	280 (at October 1992)
1993–94	279 (at October 1993)
1994–95	281 (at October 1994)
1995–96	293 (at October 1995)

It is not possible to project accurately an enrolment figure for each of the next five years. The Department has approved an enrolment number of 333 for the 1996–97 school year.

Accommodation issues at the school are a matter for the South-Eastern education and library board and there are no proposals to provide additional accommodation. The provision of additional teaching staff is a matter for the board of governors of the school.

My Department has approved a temporary variation to the school's admissions number to 55 for the 1996–97 school year. The school has received 55 applications.

Civil Evidence Act 1995

Dr. Hendron: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when section 10 of the Civil Evidence Act 1995 will be brought into effect in Northern Ireland. [28437]

Sir John Wheeler: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply I gave the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) on 20 March 1996, *Official Report*, column *199*.

European Union Flag

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what proposals he has to fly the European Union flag in Northern Ireland on European day; and if he will make a statement. [28458]

Sir John Wheeler: The Government have no formal plans to fly the European flag in Northern Ireland on 8 May.

SCOTLAND

Sludge, Garrock Head

Mr. Foulkes: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what results have been obtained by the marine laboratory in Aberdeen from its survey of sludge dumped at Garrock Head; what evidence of the effect of polychlorinated biphenyls, DDT or Dieldrin in the food chain has been evaluated; what action he has taken or will take to deal with the problems arising; and if he will make a statement. [28100]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson: The Scottish Office Agriculture, Environment and Fisheries Department's marine laboratory in Aberdeen regularly monitors contaminant levels at Garroch Head. All results of this monitoring programme are published or are available for public inspection. Fish analyses show that detected levels of contamination are well below internationally agreed limits. The marine laboratory's monitoring programme will continue up to and beyond 1998, when sewage sludge dumping in UK waters will cease.

Ayrshire Child Abuse Case

Mr. Foulkes: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will publish the judgment of Sheriff Miller made at Ayr sheriff court on 25 April on the reduction requested by the Scottish Legal Aid Board in the fees charged by lawyers in the Ayrshire child abuse case, insofar as it relates to public money involved. [28296]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Proceedings on 25 April were held in private and details of the decision by Sheriff Miller were made available only to the parties to the action. I understand that the chief executive of SLAB will make the decision available to the hon. Member very shortly.

Physiotherapy

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) how many people qualified as physiotherapists in each year since 1990; [28206]

(2) which regions no longer provide funding for clinical education placements for physiotherapists. [28207]

(3) how many placements were available for physiotherapy students for each year since 1990. [28208]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: This information is not held centrally.

Mrs. Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many physiotherapists there were in *(a)* general practices and *(b)* hospitals, in each health board area, in each of the last two years. [28210]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The information available centrally is shown in the tables.

Qualified physiotherapists employed by NHS Trusts in Scotland: by health board area: as at 30 September

	1994		[1]1995	
	Headcount	Whole time equivalent	Headcount	Whole time equivalent
Total	1,774	1,427.2	1,865	1,508.9
Argyll and Clyde	118	89.8	127	100.1
Ayrshire and Arran	138	104.3	143	112.7
Borders	44	33.7	42	32.5
Dumfries and Galloway	38	30.7	40	30.9
Fife	121	100.5	119	98.2
Forth Valley	84	69.2	88	75.8
Grampian	170	123.5	183	137.1
Greater Glasgow	374	316.5	378	318.6
Highland	69	58.7	72	58.4
Lanarkshire	144	117.1	162	131.4
Lothian	309	253.1	333	273.0
Orkney	8	5.7	8	5.6
Shetland	8	8.0	9	7.9
Tayside	135	105.8	147	116.1
Western Isles	14	10.6	14	10.6

[1] Provisional.

Physiotherapists employed in general medical practices in Scotland; by health board; as at 1 April

	1994		1995	
	Headcount	Whole time equivalent	Headcount	Wholetime equivalent
Scotland[1,2,3]	2	0.1	—	—
	—	—	—	—
Argyll and Clyde	1	0.1	—	—
Ayrshire and Arran	—	—	—	—
Borders	—	—	—	—
Dumfries and Galloway	—	—	—	—
Fife	—	—	—	—
Forth Valley	—	—	—	—
Grampian	—	—	—	—

Physiotherapists employed in general medical practices in Scotland; by health board; as at 1 April

	1994		1995	
	Headcount	Whole time equivalent	Headcount	Wholetime equivalent
Greater Glasgow	—	—	—	—
Highland	—	—	—	—
Lanarkshire	—	—	—	—
Lothian	—	—	—	—
Orkney	—	—	—	—
Shetland	—	—	—	—
Tayside	1	0.0	—	—
Western Isles	—	—	—	—

[1] 1994 data exclude staff in fundholding practices in Fife Health Board.
[2] Data for Grampian Health Board are as at the dates shown, with the exception of those staff in 'live' fundholding practices for whom expenditure was met from the Practice Staff Scheme, for whom data are as at the date on which the practice became 'live'.
[3] As Lothian Health board was unable to supply data as at 1 April 1995, data as at 1 October 1994 have been substituted.
— = nil.
0.0 = negligible.

Mrs. Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of the current number of physiotherapy vacancies. [28209]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Up-to-date information as requested is not yet available centrally. Information on vacancy levels at 31 March 1996 is being sought from NHS trusts in Scotland.

Local Authority Boundaries

Mr. Home Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the local authorities which cover all or part of each of the parliamentary constituencies which will come into existence at the end of the present Parliament. [28711]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The information is as follows:

New Parliamentary constituency	*Unitary authority(s)*
Aberdeen Central	Aberdeen City
Aberdeen North	Aberdeen City
Aberdeen South	Aberdeen City
Airdrie and Shotts	North Lanarkshire
Angus	Angus/Dundee City/Perth and Kinross
Argyll and Bute	Argyll and Bute
Ayr	South Ayrshire
Banff and Buchan	Aberdeenshire
Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross	Highland
Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley	East Ayrshire/South Ayrshire
Central Fife	Fife
Clydebank and Milngavie	East Dunbartonshire/West Dunbartonshire
Clydesdale	South Lanarkshire
Coatbridge and Chryston	East Dunbartonshire/North Lanarkshire
Cumbernauld and Kilsyth	North Lanarkshire
Cunninghame North	North Ayrshire
Cunninghame South	North Ayrshire
Dumbarton	Argyll and Bute/West Dunbartonshire
Dumfries	Dumfries and Galloway
Dundee East	Dundee City
Dundee West	Dundee City
Dunfermline East	Fife
Dunfermline West	Fife
East Kilbride	South Lanarkshire
East Lothian	East Lothian
Eastwood	East Renfrewshire
Edinburgh Central	City of Edinburgh
Edinburgh East and Musselburgh	City of Edinburgh/East Lothian
Edinburgh North and Leith	City of Edinburgh
Edinburgh Pentlands	City of Edinburgh
Edinburgh South	City of Edinburgh
Edinburgh West	City of Edinburgh
Falkirk East	Falkirk
Falkirk West	Falkirk
Galloway and Upper Nithsdale	Dumfries and Galloway
Galloway Anniesland	City of Glasgow
Glasgow Baillieston	City of Glasgow
Glasgow Cathcart	City of Glasgow
Glasgow Govan	City of Glasgow
Glasgow Kelvin	City of Glasgow
Glasgow Maryhill	City of Glasgow
Glasgow Pollok	City of Glasgow
Glasgow Rutherglen	City of Glasgow/South Lanarkshire
Glasgow Shettleston	City of Glasgow
Glasgow Springburn	City of Glasgow
Gordon	Aberdeenshire/Moray
Greenock and Inverclyde	Inverclyde
Hamilton North and Bellshill	North Lanarkshire/South Lanarkshire
Hamilton South	South Lanarkshire
Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber	Highland
Kilmarnock and Loudoun	East Ayrshire
Kirkcaldy	Fife
Linlithgow	West Lothian
Livingston	West Lothian
Midlothian	Midlothian
Moray	Moray
Motherwell and Wishaw	North Lanarkshire
North East Fife	Fife
North Tayside	Angus/Perth and Kinross
Ochil	Clackmannanshire/Perth and Kinross/Stirling
Orkney and Shetland	Orkney Islands/Shetland Islands
Paisley North	Renfrewshire
Paisley South	Renfrewshire
Perth	Perth and Kinross
Ross, Skye and Inverness West	Highland
Roxburgh and Berwickshire	The Scottish Borders
Stirling	Stirling
Strathkelvin and Bearsden	East Dunbartonshire
Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale	Midlothian/The Scottish Borders
West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine	Aberdeenshire
Western Isles	Western Isles
West Renfrewshire	Inverclyde/Renfrewshire

Speech and Language Therapists

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the number of speech and language therapists at each grade for spine points 23 to 27 in each of the past five years. [28444]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The information requested is not available centrally.

Strathclyde Police

Mr. McFall: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, pursuant to his answer of 29 April, *Official Report*, column *376*, relating to Strathclyde police (1) if he will list those individuals in the criminal justice system involved in the investigation outwith Strathclyde police; [29012]

(2) how many witnesses in relation to the allegations have been interviewed by Strathclyde police; and how many *(a)* cautions and *(b)* charges resulted; [29014]

(3) what instructions have been issued by Crown counsel regarding the conduct of the inquiry; [29011]

(4) on what date the decision was made by Strathclyde police and the regional prosecutor that the inquiry would be internal. [29013]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: My noble and learned Friend the Lord Advocate has confirmed that it would be wholly inappropriate to give details of those individuals involved in this investigation or of the instructions given by Crown counsel. As I stated in my reply to a question from the hon. Member on 29 April, column *376*, it would also be inappropriate to disclose details of the investigation. The Lord Advocate has confirmed, however, that no charges have been brought against any person. The regional procurator fiscal decided on 2 June 1995 that an investigation should be conducted by Strathclyde police. Crown counsel was aware of this decision, which has been kept under review.

Commercial Premises Valuation Appeals

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what was in each *(a)* former regional and island council and *(b)* unitary council area in Scotland the total number of appeals lodged against valuation of commercial premises, the number and percentage of appeals which so far have been dealt with, the number and percentage of appeals which so far have been (i) successful and (ii) unsuccessful, and the average amount of time taken to deal with a valuation appeal for each council area. [28630]

Mr. Kynoch *[holding answer 10 May 1996]:* From 31 March 1996, detailed quarterly information on the progress of appeals against valuation is being collected from assessors for each valuation area, or valuation joint board area. The available information, on the progress of appeals up to 31 March 1996, is given in table 1. This shows numbers and progress of appeals in relation to the 1995 revaluation, and also of inter-revaluation appeals.

Information is also being collected from assessors on the number and progress of appeals in relation to the 1995 revaluation for properties in each unitary council area. The available information, on the progress of appeals up to 31 March 1996, is given in table 2.

Detailed information is not collected on the time taken to process each appeal. Overall, almost 9 per cent. of appeals and complaints lodged with assessors against the 1995 revaluation were dealt with by 31 March 1996, which is within 15 weeks of 15 December 1995, the date by which such appeals had to be lodged. All appeals arising from the 1996 revaluation have to be dealt with by 31 March 1998 under the terms of the Valuation Timetable (Scotland) Order 1995.

Table 1: Number of appeals lodged and progress of appeals by valuation area/valuation joint board area

Valuation area/ Valuation joint board area	*Number of appeals lodged between 1 April 1995 and 31 March 1996*		
	Appeals against 1995 revaluation Number	*Running roll appeals[1] Number*	*Total all appeals Number*
Scotland	103,172	3,896	107,068
Ayrshire	7,225	283	7,508
Central Scotland	5,504	342	5,846
Dumfries and Galloway	3,025	46	3,071
Dunbartonshire and Argyll and Bute	5,666	163	5,829
Fife	6,249	257	6,506
Glasgow	18,528	631	19,159
Grampian	10,293	530	10,823
Highland and Western Isles	6,178	203	6,381
Lanarkshire	10,283	308	10,591
Lothian	13,324	521	13,845
Orkney and Shetland	468	55	523
Renfrewshire	6,505	268	6,773
Scottish Borders	1,944	50	1,994
Tayside	7,980	239	8,219

[1] Inter-revaluation appeals.

Valuation area/ Valuation joint board area	*Progress of appeals between 1 April 1995 and 31 March 1996*							
	Cases disposed of prior to VAC[1] hearing		*Cases heard and disposed of by the VAC[1]*		*Cases dismissed by the VAC[1] for non- attendance*		*Cases referred to and accepted by the Lands Tribunal for Scotland*	
	Number	*Per cent.*	*Number*	*Per cent.*	*Number*	*Per cent.*	*Number*	*Per cent.*
Scotland	9,236	8.6	96	0.1	229	0.2	0	0.0
Ayrshire	145	1.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Central Scotland	1,718	29.4	1	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Dumfries and Galloway	438	14.3	1	0.0	16	0.5	0	0.0
Dumbartonshire and Argyll and Bute	1,160	19.9	0	0.0	60	1.0	0	0.0
Fife	769	11.8	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Glasgow	1,795	9.4	4	0.0	118	0.6	0	0.0
Grampian	1,140	10.5	3	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0

Valuation area/ Valuation joint board area	Progress of appeals between 1 April 1995 and 31 March 1996: Cases disposed of prior to VAC[1] hearing		Cases heard and disposed of by the VAC[1]		Cases dismissed by the VAC[1] for non- attendance		Cases referred to and accepted by the Lands Tribunal for Scotland	
	Number	Per cent.	Number	Per cent.	Number	Per cent.	Number	Per cent.
Highland and Western Isles	60	0.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Lanarkshire	314	3.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Lothian	778	5.6	86	0.6	35	0.3	0	0.0
Orkney and Shetland	240	45.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Renrewshire	59	0.9	0	0	0.0	0.0	0	0.0
Scottish Borders	532	26.7	1	0.1	0	0.0	0	0.0
Tayside	88	1.1	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0

[1] VAC: Valuation Appeals Committee.

Table 2: Number of appeals against the 1995 revaluation of non-domestic rates

Valuation board area	Council	Appeals against 1995 revaluation[1]: Number of appeals	Number of properties[2]	Appeals disposed of up to 31 March 1996: Number of properties	Percentage of properties
Scotland		103,172	94,327	8,639	9.2
Ayrshire	East Ayrshire	2,215	2,038	30	1.5
	North Ayrshire	2,382	2,291	30	1.3
	South Ayrshire	2,628	2,425	48	2.0
Central Scotland	Clackmannanshire	634	621	165	26.6
	Falkirk	2,711	2,553	894	35.0
	Stirling	2,159	2,021	484	23.9
Dumfries and Galloway	Dumfries and Galloway	3,025	2,923	434	14.8
Dunbartonshire and Argyll and Bute	Argyll and Bute	3,028	2,855	583	20.4
	East Dunbartonshire	1,195	1,107	258	23.3
	West Dunbartonshire	1,443	1,357	263	19.4
Fife	Fife	6,249	5,870	742	12.6
Glasgow	Glasgow, City of	18,528	16,013	1,584	9.9
Grampian	Aberdeen City	5,500	4,926	722	14.7
	Aberdeenshire	3,304	3,143	161	5.1
	Moray	1,489	1,439	142	9.9
Highland and Western Isles	Highland	5,860	5,489	55	1.0
	Western Isles	318	311	2	0.6
Lanarkshire	North Lanarkshire	4,995	4,455	171	3.8
	South Lanarkshire	5,288	4,628	89	1.9
Lothian	East Lothian	1,005	967	5	0.5
	Edinburgh, City of	9,150	8,517	762	8.9
	Midlothian	777	743	9	1.2
	West Lothian	2,392	2,139	120	5.6
Orkney and Shetland	Orkney	294	286	111	38.8
	Shetland	174	167	118	70.7
Renfrewshire	East Renfrewshire	1,071	985	3	0.3
	Inverclyde	1,713	1,479	14	0.9
	Renfrewshire	3,721	3,285	38	1.2
Scottish Borders	Scottish Borders	1,944	1,893	516	27.3
Tayside	Angus	1,597	1,547	23	1.5
	Dundee City	3,918	3,520	16	0.5
	Perth and Kinross	2,465	2,334	47	2.0

[1] Appeals and complaints lodged with Assessors departments in relation to the 1995 revaluation.
[2] The number of properties against which there are appeals. This is less than the number of appeals because there are, in some cases more than one appeal in relation to a property.

DEFENCE

Louise Jensen (Killing)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if Her Majesty's Government will pay the defence costs of the appeals by the three British military personnel against sentence and conviction for the manslaughter of a Danish tour guide in Cyprus; and if he will make a statement. [28598]

Mr. Soames: The Army legal aid scheme will continue to pay the legal expenses of the three British service men convicted of the manslaughter of Miss Louise Jensen until all legal processes have been exhausted.

Refit Contracts

Mr. Hicks: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list those refit contracts that have been undertaken at *(a)* Rosyth and *(b)* Devonport as part of their core allocated programmes since 1994; and what has been the average cost per man hour to public funds for each contract. [29057]

Mr. Arbuthhnot: The following core refits have been completed since 1 April 1994:

at Rosyth: HM ships Berkeley, Leeds Castle, Gloucester, Ledbury, Orkney, York, Shetland, Edinburgh, Dumbarton Castle and Cattistock; and

at Devonport: HM ships Illustrious, Battleaxe, London, Bulldog, Trafalgar and Herald.

Information relating to labour costs is commercially confidential.

Mr. Hicks: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will list for *(a)* Rosyth and *(b)* Devonport dockyards, the refit contracts that have been provisionally allocated as part of their core allocated programmes and the projected starting date for each contract; [28058]

(2) if he will list those Royal Navy ships and submarines that will require refits before the year 2002 and be the subject of competitive tendering; and what is the estimated time period and cost of each contract. [28059]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The refit programme continues to be governed by the principles announced by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh, Pentlands (Mr. Rifkind) on 24 June 1993, *Official Report*, columns 447–50 in an oral statement. It is not our practice to release information relating to the future movements of vessels, including their refit start dates. Individual refits will continue to be announced either at the time their allocation is confirmed, for those in the core programme, or at the outset of competition for those in the unallocated programme.

United States Air Force

Mr. Madden: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will release the correspondence between Her Majesty's Government and the United States Administration under which facilities in the United Kingdom are made available to the United States air force; and if he will make a statement. [29072]

Mr. Soames: Facilities are made available for use by United States forces in accordance with the NATO status of forces agreement of 1951 and confidential arrangements between the Governments of the United Kingdom and of the United States of America. It is not our practice to disclose the details of such arrangements.

RAF Menwith Hill

Mr. Madden: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what legal process was involved in designating RAF Menwith Hill; on what date this change of name took effect; how many RAF personnel are stationed at RAF Menwith Hill; what is the role and function at the base of the senior RAF officer; who is the base commander; who is accountable to the senior RAF officer; to whom he is accountable; and if he will make a statement. [29073]

Mr. Soames: Menwith Hill is a Crown freehold site belonging to the Ministry of Defence. The designation RAF Menwith Hill came into effect on 19 February 1996. This was simply an administrative change to bring the base into line with other RAF sites made available by the Ministry of Defence to the United States Government.

The senior RAF representative at the base is the RAF commander whose role is to provide advice to the base commander, who is the senior US officer on the site, on a range of UK policy and protocol matters. He is also responsible for liaising with the local community.

The RAF commander has the status, disciplinary powers and responsibilities of a commanding officer in respect of all RAF personnel and in respect of civilians—except the Ministry of Defence police—employed by the MOD at the site. However, it is not our policy to give details of personnel assignment. As a serving RAF officer, the RAF commander is responsible to the higher command of the Royal Air Force, which in this instance is exercised through the air officer commanding directly administered units at HQ strike command, High Wycombe.

Territorial Army

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if members of the Territorial Army called up for service in Bosnia were required to send home their civilian clothes and travelling bags from Bosnia at the start of their service. [27653]

Mr. Soames *[holding answer 2 May 1996]:* No policy instructions have been issued from the UK or in theatre which require personnel to send home their civilian clothing. I understand, however, that a few members of the Territorial Army have arrived in theatre with inappropriate civilian clothing. Storage space for personal effects is limited in Bosnia and in such circumstances the individual may well have been instructed to return unnecessary clothing to the UK. The guidance on civilian clothing given to the reservists about to deploy to Bosnia has been made more specific, so that the problem should not recur.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Israel-Lebanon Peace Settlement

Miss Emma Nicholson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans Her Majesty's Government have to use their good offices to raise the issue of reparation payments for damage to property and infrastructure inflicted during the recent Israeli-Lebanese conflict as part of a peace settlement. [28562]

Mr. Hanley: Details of a peace settlement between Israel and Lebanon would be a matter for the two countries concerned. We are concerned by the scale of damage in Lebanon and are discussing Lebanese requests for reconstruction assistance with our EU partners.

Armed Conflict

Mr. Alan Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what proposals he intends to put forward at the Council of Foreign Ministers on 13 May to make the European Union more effective in preventing armed conflict *(a)* between and *(b)* within states. [28451]

Mr. David Davis: I shall not be putting forward any proposals about the EU's role in conflict prevention at the 13 May Foreign Affairs Council. The EU's role in conflict prevention in Africa was considered at the 25 March Foreign Affairs Council. Officials are currently examining detailed proposals. The UK plays a leading role in conflict prevention—through national action, through the EU's common foreign and security policy, and through other international organisations, in particular the UN.

Mr. Lashkar Singh Dhami

Mr. Khabra: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what contacts have been made with the Indian high commission in London, and the authorities in India, to establish the facts of the disappearance of Mr. Lashkar Singh Dhami since his arrival in Bombay on 7 May 1992, on British Airways flight No. 139. [28719]

Mr. Hanley: Our high commission in New Delhi and our deputy high commission in Bombay have made extensive inquiries of the Indian authorities in an attempt to trace Mr. Dhami. The latest contact was with the missing persons bureau of the Bombay criminal investigation department in January 1996. It is extremely disappointing that, as yet, there has been no trace of Mr. Dhami.

Our posts will continue to press the Indian authorities for the news of Mr. Dhami. However, they have no investigative role in cases of this nature. The proper channel is through Interpol. There has been no contact with the Indian high commission in London.

Mr. Khabra: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the whereabouts of Mr. Lashkar Singh Dhami, who arrived in Bombay, India, on 7 May 1992, on British Airways flight No. 139. [28720]

Mr. Hanley: Despite extensive inquiries by our high commission in New Delhi and our deputy high commission in Bombay, there has been no trace of Mr. Dhami since his arrival in Bombay on 7 May 1992.

War Crimes Tribunal (The Hague)

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what has been the United Kingdom's contribution to the work of the war crimes tribunal in The Hague; and if he will make a statement. [28856]

Mr. Hanley: We have consistently demonstrated our support for the international criminal tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

To date, we have donated £950,000 in assessed contributions to the tribunal. We have also given almost £500,000 in voluntary contributions to help fund the secondment of staff and to provide equipment.

European Court

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when Her Majesty's Government will table proposals at the intergovernmental conference to limit the power of the European Court of Justice. [28916]

Mr. David Davis: I refer my right hon. Friend to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, South and Maldon (Mr. Whittingdale), on 3 April, *Official Report*, column *382*.

North Atlantic Common Market

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he has yet tabled proposals in *(a)* Brussels and *(b)* Washington to develop a common market of the north Atlantic. [28914]

Mr. Hanley: We have been at the forefront of European states pressing for the further liberalisation of trade with north America—in both Brussels and Washington. One of the priority elements of the EU/US action plan, which closely reflects the UK's ideas, is a joint study which will look at ways of reducing transatlantic barriers to trade and investment.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if it remains his policy to create a north Atlantic free trade area. [28931]

Mr. David Davis: As was made clear in the Queen's Speech of 15 November 1995, this Government

"will continue to pursue the objective of transatlantic free trade in the context of world trade liberalisation".

Lebanon

Miss Emma Nicholson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will support the findings of the United Nations report on the shelling of the UN base at Qana. [28704]

Mr. Hanley: We welcome the publication of the UN's thorough report into the Qana bombing and the fact that it has been discussed in the Security Council. We have expressed in the Security Council and elsewhere our concern at the report's findings. We look to the Israelis to respond fully to it.

Taiwan (Environmental Damage)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations his Department has received concerning environmental degradation and pollution in Taiwan; and if he will make a statement. [28642]

Mr. Hanley: None. The environmental problems of Taiwan are primarily the responsibility of the authorities in Taiwan. Taiwan gross national product per capita in 1994 was US$ 11,604, which suggests Taiwan has the financial resources necessary to deal with its problems. Total reserves excluding gold at February 1996 stand at US$ 90.1 billion. British companies stand ready to supply the relevant expertise and equipment on a commercial basis.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action is being taken by the United Kingdom to help Taiwan tackle its environmental problems; and if he will make a statement. [28645]

Mr. Hanley: The environmental problems of Taiwan are primarily the responsibility of the authorities in Taiwan. Taiwan gross national product per capita in 1994 was US$ 11,604, which suggests Taiwan has the financial resources necessary to deal with its problems. Total reserves excluding gold at February 1996 stand at US$90.1 billion. British companies stand ready to supply the relevant expertise and equipment on a commercial basis.

British Council Budget

Miss Lestor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans the Government have to help the British Council to cover the costs involved in restructuring following reductions in its budget. [28722]

Mr. Hanley: The possibility of the Government helping the British Council with some of its restructuring costs is being looked at the context of the studies currently being carried out with the aim of avoiding overseas post closures.

Sudan

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the recent elections in Sudan. [28884]

Mr. Hanley: Regrettably, the elections did not offer the Sudanese people a full choice. The opposition, whose parties remain banned, refused to take part. Government candidates were thus given a clear run. Observers also reported a number of flaws in the election organisation and procedures.

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the current state of relations between the United Kingdom and Sudan. [28883]

Mr. Hanley: Relations with Sudan remain cool. We are concerned at the Government of Sudan's prosecution of the civil war in Sudan, their appalling human rights record, their support to terrorist groups and their obstruction of the UN's Operation Lifeline Sudan relief operation. The UK voted for, and will implement, UN Security Council resolution 1054, which imposes diplomatic and visa sanctions on the Government of Sudan for their failure to hand over three suspects implicated in last year's assassination attempt on President Mubarak of Egypt and their support for terrorist groups.

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the human rights situation in Sudan. [28885]

Mr. Hanley: We remain extremely concerned about human rights in Sudan. The continuing civil war in Sudan is a source of many serious abuses of human rights. We have received disturbing reports of slavery and genocide. The Sudanese authorities continue to detain activists without trial.

We welcome the Government of Sudan's agreement to resume co-operation with the UN special rapporteur, Gaspar Biro, and hope that they will facilitate his early visit to Sudan.

West Bank and Gaza Strip

Miss Lestor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action his Department has taken to raise with the Israeli authorities the issue of access by international non-governmental organisation workers to the west bank and Gaza strip. [28721]

Mr. Hanley: We raised the specific cases of British non-governmental organisation workers with the Israeli authorities through our embassy in Tel Aviv. We also have pressed the Israeli Government at a senior level to relax the closure on the west bank and Gaza.

British Military Cemetery (Baghdad)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has had from the keeper of the British military cemetery in Baghdad about his need to grow vegetables to sustain his family within the cemetery grounds; and when the cemetery keeper was last paid by Her Majesty's Government. [27762]

Mr. Hanley: None. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission is responsible for the British military cemetery in Baghdad and for paying staff who work there.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the condition of the grave in the British military cemetery in Baghdad of the late Lieutenant-General Sir Stanley Maude, commander of the metropolitan expeditionary force. [27766]

Mr. Hanley: The Commonwealth War Graves Commission is responsible for the British military cemetery in Baghdad.

Food and Agriculture Organisation Report (Iraq)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what evaluation he has made of the FAO report of 1995 on Iraq in relation to cereals, meat, fish and baby milk. [27763]

Mr. Hanley: We remain very concerned about the suffering of the Iraqi people. Our aid programme has a high priority, and we are working for implementation of UN Security Council resolution 986. We believe, though, that the 1995 report by the Food and Agriculture Organisation and the World Food Programme gave a seriously misleading picture of the situation in Iraq. The report did not take account of the misallocation of resources by the Iraqi regime. Further, the research methods were flawed—the statistics in the report were based in part on Iraqi data, which could not be independently confirmed. We have taken this up with the FAO and the WFP.

Sanctions (Iraq)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on UK policy to United Nations joint council resolution 986. [27765]

Mr. Hanley: We co-sponsored Security Council resolution 986 in April 1995 as a way of alleviating the suffering of the Iraqi people. The regime has since refused to co-operate. We hope that current discussions in New York will at last result in Iraq implementing the resolution. Meanwhile, UN sanctions must remain for as long as Saddam refuses to comply with Iraq's international obligations.

"Hundan Al Belgrano"

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received from *(a)* his Department's officials in Argentina, *(b)* other sources in Argentina and *(c)* Sir Sandy Woodward about the showing of the film "Hundan Al Belgrano"; and what responses he has sent. [27809]

Mr. Hanley: I have received only one report, from our embassy in Buenos Aires, to the effect that the film is now showing in one cinema in Buenos Aires.

Salman Rushdie

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the work of the European Union delegation which visited Iran to discuss terrorism and the fatwa against Salman Rushdie. [27849]

Mr. Hanley: A European Union troika delegation visited Iran on 2 to 3 April 1996 to deliver a clear message on terrorism and the middle east peace process, as mandated by EU Foreign Ministers at their meeting in Palermo on 9 to 10 March 1996. The delegation received assurances that Iran would not interfere with, or sabotage, the peace process. Iran also reaffirmed its commitment to the "critical dialogue" with the EU.

Hafey Dulkamoni

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations Her Majesty's Government have made to the German Government about the impending release of Hafey Dulkamoni, a Syrian citizen. [27850]

Mr. Hanley: None. Any question of release is solely a matter for the German authorities.

German Trade (Iran)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations Her Majesty's Government have made to the German Government to abandon trade relations with Iran. [27853]

Mr. David Davis: None.

Ali Fallahian

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations Her Majesty's Government have made to the German Government about the guided tour given by the German intelligence chief, Bernd Schmidbauer, of the German intelligence headquarters at Wiesbaden, to Ali Fallahian, head of Iranian intelligence. [27854]

Mr. Hanley: The Iranian Intelligence Minister, Ali Fallahian, visited Germany as a guest of the German Government from 6 to 7 October 1993. The arrangements for the visit were a matter for the German Government. The right hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Hurd), then the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, expressed his concern to Foreign Minister Kinkel about the visit and about Iran's activities.

Russian Nuclear Submarines

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what protests Her Majesty's Government have made to the Russian Government about an operation to dump 20 elderly nuclear submarines at sea. [27855]

Mr. Hanley: No protest has been made. Media reports of such an operation have not been substantiated. At the Moscow nuclear safety and security summit on 20 April, President Yeltsin stated that Russia would formally accept in 1996 the 1993 amendment to the London convention 1972 banning the dumping at sea of all radioactive waste.

Clothing Costs (Royal Family)

Mr. Tony Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what costs were met by his Department for clothes worn by the Princess of Wales when she participated in the tour of Oman, Qatar, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia in 1986. [28923]

Mr. Rifkind: It is not possible to specify individual expenditure items for this visit, since detailed records for 1986 have been destroyed in line with Government accounting practice.

Mr Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much his Department has paid for clothes for members of the royal family undertaking official duties abroad in each of the last 10 years; and if he will identify the recipient in each case. [28922]

Mr. Rifkind: The information requested is no longer available in full, and could not be provided except at disproportionate cost.

Overseas Visits (Royal Family)

Mr. Tony Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much his Department has paid towards the cost of visits abroad by members of the royal family in each of the last 10 years. [28921]

Mr. Rifkind: Expenditure by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on official visits overseas by members of the royal family in each of the last 10 years is as follows:

1986–87: £382,500
1987–88: £386,600
1988–89: £396,400
1989–90: £424,000
1990–91: £464,000
1991–92: £620,800
1992–93: £455,695
1993–94: £491,845
1994–95: £558,268
1995–96: £405,342 (bills presented to date).

Diplomats (Expulsions)

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many United Kingdom diplomats officially accredited to missions in foreign countries have been expelled from *(a)* Libya, *(b)* the former Soviet Union, *(c)* the former Czechoslovakia, *(d)* Bulgaria, *(e)* Cuba, *(f)* Vietnam, *(g)* Iran, *(h)* South Africa and (i) Sudan, since 3 March 1995; and on what dates and for what stated reasons. [29006]

Mr. Hanley: One. The head of the British interest section at Tripoli was expelled on 24 December 1995. The stated reason was that he was
"engaging in activities which were incompatible with his diplomatic status".

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many diplomats officially accredited to missions in London have been expelled since his answer of 18 January 1995, *Official Report*, column *580*, and if he will indicate their nationalities. [29009]

Mr. Hanley: Two diplomats have been expelled; one from Libya, one from Iraq.

Hong Kong

Mr. Byers: To ask the Secretary of State and Commonwealth Affairs what representations have been made to the Government of China concerning the protection of existing business interests in Hong Kong; and if he will make a statement. [28944]

Mr. Hanley: We have on many occasions explained to the Chinese, through the Sino-British joint liaison group and other official channels, the importance of maintaining Hong Kong's economic and social systems, in particular an environment in which business can prosper and flourish. These priorities were enshrined in the Sino-British joint declaration on the question of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong basic law—a Chinese law which will be Hong Kong's constitution after 30 June 1997—which contains important provisions designed to ensure that Hong Kong businesses can continue to operate in a free and open environment. It provides for the economic and social systems in Hong Kong to remain unchanged, for Hong Kong to retain its status as an international financial centre, and for private property, ownership of enterprises, legitimate right of inheritance and foreign investment to be protected by law. The common law ill continue to apply in Hong Kong.

Telecommunications Industry (Hong Kong)

Mr. Byers: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions have been held with the Chinese Government in the last three years about the future of the telecommunications industry in Hong Kong. [28946]

Mr. Hanley: The regulations and development of the telecommunications industry in Hong Kong is a matter for the Hong Kong Government. However, the British side keeps the Chinese side informed, in the Sino-British joint liaison group, of significant developments in the industry. We also consult the Chinese side on the award of renewal of major contracts, including telecommunication franchises, that will straddle the transition.

State Recognition

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the states Her Majesty's Government do not officially recognise. [29076]

Mr. Hanley: Those entities which some claim to be states, but which are not recognised as such by the UK are:

Palestine
Taiwan
The Saharan Arab Democratic Republic
The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

Chemical Weapons Convention

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made towards United Kingdom ratification of the chemical weapons convention. [29512]

Mr. David Davis: The UK's instrument of ratification was signed on 1 May. The instrument has been sent to New York and will be deposited with the Secretary-General of the United Nations today.

Official Hospitality

Mr. Tony Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much was spent on official hospitality by his Department and all associated agencies in the financial year 1995–96. [28569]

Mr. Hanley: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) on 1 February, *Official Report*, columns *857–58* which included a projection of £8,213,136 for expenditure in 1995–96 on hospitality and entertainment by the FCO, diplomatic wing; its Wilton Park agency; the Overseas Development Administration; and the Natural Resources Institute, which was then the ODA's agency, but is now in the private sector.

Provisional outturn expenditure figures for 1995–96 are expected to be available soon.

PRIME MINISTER

Ministers (Unlawful Actions)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the occasions on which Government Ministers have had their actions declared unlawful since 1973 in *(a)* United Kingdom courts, *(b)* the European Court of Human Rights and *(c)* the European Court of Justice. [28980]

The Attorney-General: I have been asked to reply.

As regards cases in the United Kingdom and in the European Court of Justice, the information requested by the hon. Member is not held centrally, and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. In any event, most actions in the European Court of Justice are either references from national courts, in which the European Court of Justice does not declare actions to be unlawful, or infraction proceedings commenced by the Commission, where the case is against the United Kingdom and in practice it rarely, if ever, happens that action taken by a particular Government Minister is in issue. As regards the European Court on Human Rights, proceedings are against the United Kingdom, rather than individual Government Ministers. In practice, it is difficult to say that a breach of the convention has arisen solely because of action taken by a particular Government Minister.

Healthcare Group plc

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 1 April, *Official Report*, column *74* (1) what procedure was used by his Department prior to its entering into its contract with the General Healthcare Group plc; what other private companies or organisations were approached with a view to tendering for the contract now held by Healthcare Group plc; how many companies or organisations tendered for this contract; and what adjustments have been made to the terms of this contract since it was entered into; [28621]

(2) how many audiology tests were carried out under his Department's contract with the General Healthcare Group plc in each financial year since 1993–94; and what was the cost of this contract in each of these years. [28622]

Mr. Burt: These are matters for Mr. Kevin Caldwell, the chief executive of the War Pensions Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Kevin Caldwell to Mr. Brian Donohoe, dated 10 May 1996:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions about the contract held with General Healthcare group plc and the process leading up to the award.

The tender exercise leading to the award of contract began with an advertisement in the national press on 30 November 1992. This invited any organisation who wished to do so to express an interest in participating in the exercise with a view to inclusion on the tender list.

Questionnaires were then issued to thirty eight organisational who had expressed interest, requesting information on such areas as financial stability, capacity and capability, management infrastructure and commitment together with experience in the audiology field. Evaluation of these responses identified six companies who appeared suitable for shortlisting to the next stage, which consisted of site reference visits and further exploration of potential capability to provide the service. Of these six, four were considered suitable for inclusion on the tender list.

In fact sealed tenders were received from three companies: Nuffield Audiological Services, Minerva Health Management and General Healthcare Group PLC. They were opened in line with usual Departmental guidelines and evaluated by a panel comprising representatives from medical, operational and contractual backgrounds.

Following its analysis, the tender evaluation panel produced a report recommending award of a national contract to General Healthcare Group plc, trading as BMI Healthcare Audiology Services. This recommendation was endorsed by an independent Tender Board comprising senior managers within the Department.

Several adjustments have been made since the commencement of full service in 1993. These are all of an operational or administrative nature designed to modify operational aspects of the service in order to ensure maximum efficiency in the prevailing circumstances. The Terms and Conditions of the original contract remain unchanged.

The volume of tests by category together with the relevant costs in each financial year since award of contract is as follows:

	Volume of tests
14 June 1993[1] 31 March 1994	
Standard Tests	61,822
Standard Tests (Domiciliary Visit)	1,661
Tympanograms	7,984
Cortical Evoked Response Audiometry	562
Cortical Evoked Response Audiometry (Domiciliary Visit)	17
Annual Cost £2,948,588.80	
1 April 1994—31 March 1995	
Standard Tests	60,553
Standard Tests (Domiciliary Visit)	5,025
Tympanograms	8,178
Cortical Evoked Response Audiometry	2,756
Cortical Evoked Response Audiometry (Domiciliary Visit)	364
Annual Cost £3,929,563.90	
1 April 1995—31 March 1996	
Standard Tests	36,338
Standard Tests (Domiciliary Visit)	3,593
Tympanograms	4,951
Cortical Evoked Response Audiometry	2,563
Cortical Evoked Response Audiometry (Domiciliary Visit)	691
Annual Cost £3,636,035.42	

[1] Setting up of operations began in July 1993. Full services were operational from October 1993.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Child Support Agency

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the total number of cases dealt with by the Child Support Agency since it was established, within *(a)* the Newbury parliamentary constituency, *(b)* the area of Newbury district council and *(c)* the area of Berkshire county council. [28906]

Mr. Andrew Mitchell: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the chief executive, Miss Ann Chant. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Ann Chant to Mr. David Rendel, dated 10 May 1996:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Social Security about Child Support Agency cases.

Information in the form you have requested is not routinely kept, nor is it readily available.

Every case the Agency deals with involves at least two clients who may live in very different parts of the country. Our cases are allocated to an office on the basis of the location of the home of the parent with care. The Agency's work is dealt with by six Child Support Agency Centres (CSACs), each supported by Divisional and Field offices, dealing with particular geographical locations. Plymouth CSAC covers the Southwest and Central Southern regions. It has a Field office in Newbury, but the boundaries of this office do not correspond to any or all of the three areas you mention.

When the Agency was established, the Field offices dealt only with cases requiring local contact. The majority of work was dealt with by the CSAC. Since June 1995, Newbury Field office has dealt with pre maintenance assessment work in its area and has kept figures on the number of cases it has dealt with since then. Such figures, however, only relate to the area covered by the office and not the areas specified in your question.

National Insurance

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many employers make national insurance contributions; and what would be the yield from removing the present cap on employers' contributions. [28311]

Mr. Heald: There is no upper earnings limit on the payment of national insurance contributions by employers: the limit applies only to employees. It is estimated that in any one week in the year 1996–97 some 18.6 million employees will pay contributions and that of those 3.2 million will have earnings above the upper earnings limit.

If the upper earnings limit on employees' contributions were removed, it is estimated that an extra £3.25 billion would be collected in a full year.[1]

Note:

[1]Assumes that the current 10 per cent. contribution rate would apply to earnings above the upper earnings limit.

Maternity Pay

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much has been paid by employers of *(a)* under 100 employees, *(b)* under 50 employees and *(c)* under 10 employees, since the withdrawal of reimbursement of statutory maternity pay. [28750]

Mr. Heald: The information is not available in the format requested.

Small businesses which pay annual national insurance contributions of £20,000 or less are still able to obtain full reimbursement of their statutory maternity pay costs. For employers paying more than £20,000, the reimbursement rate was reduced to 92 per cent. from 4 September 1994 to meet the cost of improving maternity pay for employees as a result of the Government's implementation of the EC pregnant workers directive. The first full year following the change has just ended and any information about employers's payments will not be available until end-of-year-returns have been submitted and assessed.

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to amend the small employers' relief scheme for statutory maternity pay. [28751]

Mr. Heald: None.

Benefits (Reductions)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security on how many occasions since 1979 a benefit has been reduced in cash terms. [28632]

Mr. Burt: A comparison of the main benefit rates payable in 1978 and 1996, is made in the 1995–96 departmental report (HMSO, CM3213, March 1996), a copy of which is in the Library. The table (Fig. 20) shows no reduction in the main benefits in cash terms over that period.

State Earnings-related Pension Scheme

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners are currently in receipt of SERPS pensions; what is the average weekly payment; and what was the equivalent figure in *(a)* 1985 and *(b)* 1990. [28892]

Mr. Heald: The information is in the table.

Pensioners in receipt of additional pension

	Number of pensioners	*Net average weekly payment*
September 1995	4,584,700	£9.33
September 1990	3,066,050	£4.88
September 1985	1,443,650	£1.89

Notes:

1. Figures are for all countries. The sample size for 1985 and 1990 was 10 per cent. The sample size for 1995 was 5 per cent.
2. The net payment is the amount of additional pension paid after the deduction of a contracted out deduction (COD). A COD is deducted when a person has been contracted out of SERPS into a contracted-out pension scheme or an appropriate personal pension used in place of SERPS.

Source:

Retirement Pensions Statistics.

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the percentage of pension income of newly retired pensioners, excluding the basic state pension, which was represented by SERPS payments, in the most recent year; and what were the equivalent figures in *(a)* 1985 and *(b)* 1990. [28894]

Mr. Heald: The information is not available in the format requested.

The source of data for estimates of pensioners' incomes is the pensioners' income series. This is based on the family expenditure survey, which contains information only on total state retirement pension and cannot differentiate between basic and additional pension.

The table gives an estimate of the percentage of pensioner income of newly retired pensioners which is total state retirement pension.

State retirement pension as a proportion of pension income

Per cent.

Recently retired pensioner units	*1981*	*1987*	*1990*	*1993*
Pensioner couples	57	50	53	52
Single pensioners	58	59	61	65
All pensioner units	58	53	55	55

Notes:

1. Recently retired pensioner units are defined as being single women aged 60–64, single men aged 65–69 and couples in which the husband is aged 65–69.
2. Pension income has been defined for this purpose as being the sum of total State Retirement Pension receipt and occupational pension payments.
3. Figures are rounded to the nearest whole per cent.
4. No information is available for 1985 as the Pensioners' Income Series was not compiled for this year.
5. Estimates drawn from the PI 1993 are subject to a large degree of statistical variability, particularly in relation to recently retired pensioners because of the limited sample size, and co comparisons of estimates from different years may not give reliable results.

Sources:

Pensioners' Income Series—1981, 1987, 1990, 1993.

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the average weekly SERPS pension paid to those who retired in the most recent year; and what was the equivalent figure in *(a)* 1985 and *(b)* 1990. [28893]

Mr. Heald: The information is not available in the format requested. Figures are not available for 1990 as the movement tables were not produced due to the change from the existing pensions computer system to the pensions strategy computer system which took place during the period 1989 to 1992.

The number of new retirement pension awards and the average weekly additional pension paid for 1985 and 1995 are given in the table.

Year ending	*Number of pensioners*	*Net average weekly payment (£)*
31 March 1995	322,890	11.92
31 March 1985	251,510	2.35

Notes:

1. Figures are for all countries and the numbers of pensioners relate to the number of awards of retirement pension in the period.
2. The net payment is the amount of additional pension paid after the deduction of a contracted out deduction (COD). A COD is deducted when a person has been contracted out of SERPS into a contracted-out pension scheme or an appropriate personal pension used in place of SERPS.
3. The figures for 1985 were collected on a yearly basis ending March. The movement tables are now issued every six months. To enable a comparison to be made with the earlier figures, the 6 monthly figures of September '94 and March '95 have been added together, with the average payment being recalculated accordingly.

Source:

Retirement Pension Statistics—Movement Tables.

Child Support Act 1991

Ms Lynne: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will provide a progress report on the research work being undertaken by the centre for research in social policy at the university of Loughborough into the effects of the Child Support Act; and if he will make a statement. [28738]

Mr. Andrew Mitchell: No research into the effects of the Child Support Act has been commissioned from the university of Loughborough.

Income Support

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioner claimants of income support have savings of less than £3,000. [28896]

Mr. Roger Evans: The information is not available in the format requested. The number of income support pensioner claimants who were recorded as having capital of up to and including £3,000 was 464,000 in May 1995, the latest date for which figures are available.

Source:

Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry: May 1995

Notes:

1. Pensioner claimants are defined as those in the pensioner statistical groups ie. where either the claimant or partner is aged 60 or over.
2. The figure has been rounded to the nearest thousand.
3. Some claimants with savings of less than £3,000 may not be recorded as these amounts do not affect the assessment of benefits.

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the cost of administering income support for pensioners; and what this figure is expressed as a percentage of income support paid to pensioners. [28897]

Mr. Evans: The information is not available.

Statutory Sick Pay

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much has been paid in statutory sick pay to employees by employers of *(a)* under 100 employees, *(b)* under 50 employees and *(c)* under 10 employees since the withdrawal of the small employers relief scheme for statutory sick pay in April 1995. [28743]

Mr. Heald: The information is not available.

The first full year following replacement of the small employers relief scheme has just ended. Any information about employers' payments will not be available until end-of-year-returns have been submitted and assessed.

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many firms *(a)* in total, *(b)* with under 100 employees, *(c)* with under 50 employees and *(d)* with under 10 employees reclaimed statutory sick pay under the small employers' relief fund in each of the 10 years preceding the end of the scheme in April 1995; [28744]

(2) how much was reclaimed in statutory sick pay under the small employers' relief fund in each of the 10 years preceding the end of the scheme in April 1995 by *(a)* all firms, *(b)* firms with under 100 employees, *(c)* firms with under 50 employees and *(d)* firms with under 10 employees. [28745]

Mr. Heald: Information is not available in the format requested.

The statutory sick pay small employees relief scheme was introduced from 6 April 1991. For the years 1991–92 to 1993–94, employers were not required to distinguish in their end-of-year returns between reimbursement under SER and the 80 per cent. reimbursement of employers' SSP costs available to all employers. For 1994–95, following abolition of 80 per cent. reimbursement from 6 April 1994, the total amount reclaimed under SER was £25 million.

Pensioners (Savings)

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioner recipients of *(a)* social fund loans and *(b)* social fund grants, have savings in excess of (i) £500, (ii) £1,000 and (iii) £3,000. [28895]

Mr. Roger Evans: The information is not available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Industrial Tribunals

Mrs. Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many cases of unfair treatment have been taken to industrial tribunals by employees of the Department of Social Security in each year since 1988; and in how many of these the industrial tribunal found in favour of the employee. [28660]

Mr. Burt: The information is not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Citizens Charter

4. **Mrs. Helen Jackson:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what assessment has he made of the effectiveness of the citizens charter. [27667]

Mr. Willetts: The key criterion for evaluating the effectiveness of the citizens charter is improvement in the standards and responsiveness of public services. A full account of this is set out in last year's charter White Paper "The Citizen's Charter: The Facts and Figures".

Delegated Legislation

5. **Mr. Steen:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how many statutory instruments were introduced in the 1994–95 Session; and what is their estimated total annual cost to business and to public funds. [27668]

Mr. Freeman: Numbers of statutory instruments are recorded by calendar year. The number of new statutory instruments in 1995 was 3,345, of which fewer than 12 per cent. placed compliance costs on business. The costs of individual instruments are specified in compliance cost assessments, but these include transfers between sectors and other factors which prevent the type of aggregation requested by my hon. Friend.

Contracting Out (in Service Pensions)

12. **Mr. Martyn Jones:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what representations he has received regarding the Contracting Out (Administration of the in Service Pension Scheme) Order 1996. [27676]

Mr. Willetts: Various representations that had been made were taken fully into account in the decision to open up to competition administration of the principal civil service pension scheme and associated schemes. Competition will ensure value for money, and the focus on performance outputs will help improve further the quality of service to scheme members.

Ministerial Visit (Plymouth)

19. **Mr. Jamieson:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister when he next intends to visit Plymouth to discuss inward investment. [27684]

The Deputy Prime Minister: I have no such plans at present, but would be very glad to consider an invitation.

Widdecombe Report

20. **Dr. Goodson-Wickes:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the implementation of the Widdecombe report on the conduct of local government. [27685]

The Deputy Prime Minister: None. This is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment.

Regional Offices

21. **Ms Quin:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the relationship between his Department and the Government's regional offices. [27686]

Mr. Freeman: My Department is in regular contact with the 10 Government regional offices on those matters relevant to this Department—competitiveness and deregulation.

Departmental Initiatives

24. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what initiatives his Department is taking to disseminate abroad its work in co-ordinating Government policies. [27689]

Mr. Willetts: My Department has responded positively to interest expressed by other countries in the action we take to co-ordinate and present Government policy.

European Legislation

25. **Mr. Hain:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what assessment his Department has made of the impact of European regulations and directives. [27690]

Mr. Freeman: Revised guidance requiring Departments to produce a compliance cost assessment for each EC legislative proposal was published in January. These assessments are a vital tool for helping to minimise any costs to business arising from new legislation.

Deregulation

26. **Mr. Tony Banks:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minster what discussions he has had with trade unions in respect of his policies on deregulation. [27691]

Mr. Freeman: We welcome the views of all interested parties to our deregulation initiative, including those from trade unions.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Harry Greenway: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what plans he has to alter the number of staff in his office; and if he will make a statement. [27666]

The Deputy Prime Minister: I expect to see further reductions in staff numbers in the Office of Pubic Service in the coming year.

BSE

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what is his role in disseminating information relating to BSE. [27683]

The Deputy Prime Minister: Like other senior members of the Government, I take every opportunity to explain the Government's position.

Official Hospitality

Mr. Tony Banks: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister how much was spent on official hospitality by his Department and all associated agencies in the financial year 1995–96. [28578]

Mr. Willetts: Expenditure on official hospitality by the Cabinet Office, including the Office of Public Service, and its executive agencies, excluding HMSO and the Buying Agency, in the financial year to 31 March 1996 is estimated to be £53,900. This figure includes total annual expenditure of £5,000 on official hospitality by the Security and Facilities Agency, responsibility for which transferred to the Office of Public Service from the Department of the Environment on 1 January 1996.

Expenditure by HMSO and the Buying Agency, both of which have a different accounting year, was 38,500 and 4,000 respectively, covering the calendar year to 31 December 1995. Responsibility for TBA transferred to the Office of Public Service from the Department of the Environment on 1 January 1996.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Young Bulls

Mr. David Nicholson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what intervention proposals he has for young bulls aged around 12 months; what representations he has had on this matter; and if he will make a statement. [24465]

Mrs. Browning: There have been several representations on this matter, as a result of which young bulls were, at our request, added to the list of animals the meat of which is currently eligible to be sold into intervention in the UK. To date, intervention tenders for more than 500 tonnes of UK young bull beef have been accepted for purchase into intervention.

Cattle Herds

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the total number of *(a)* dairy and *(b)* beef cattle in England at the latest available date. [28144]

Mrs. Browning: The latest figures available are from the 1995 December agriculture survey—1 December:

Cattle and calves

	Thousands
Total breeding herd	
Dairy herd	1,838
Beef herd	798
Total heifers in calf	
Dairy herd	322
Beef herd	111
Total other cattle and calves	3,591
Total cattle and calves	6,661

Totals may not necessarily agree with the sum of their components due to rounding.

Please note that "other cattle and calves" includes bulls for service, and also cattle intended for replacements for the beef and dairy herds. Further breakdown of the figures are detailed in statistical notice 58/96/Survey of Agriculture: 1 December 1995 England—published on 9 April 1996—which is available from the MAFF press office.

Dietary Supplements

Mr. Hain: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects the European Commission to publish its forthcoming consultation document on the availability of vitamin, mineral and other dietary supplements; and for what period of time he expects that document to be open for consultation. [28220]

Mrs. Browning: I refer to the answer I gave the hon. Gentleman on 12 March in the *Official Report*, column *577*.

Mr. Hain: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list for each other member country of the European Union the information which he has evaluated on the controls which are imposed upon the availability of vitamin, mineral and other dietary supplements. [28221]

Mrs. Browning: Our understanding of the controls on the availability of vitamin, mineral and other dietary supplements in other member states is based on a number of sources, including the position member states took when this matter was previously discussed at EU level in 1992.

Mr. Hain: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to persuade his counterparts in other European countries to support his policies in respect of the continued availability of vitamin, mineral and other dietary supplements; what steps he has taken to encourage support for that policy at recent meetings of the Agriculture Council; and if he will make a statement setting out that policy. [28219]

Mrs. Browning: My Department takes every opportunity to ensure that other member states are aware of our views on dietary supplements. However, the matter is not one which is considered by the Agricultural Council.

Former Defence Site, Rhydymwyn

Mr. Hanson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress has been made with regard to investigations into the former MOD site at Rhydymwyn, Mold, Flintshire. [28271]

Mr. Boswell: In April 1996, the Ministry, in conjunction with Flintshire county council and the Welsh Development Agency, commissioned AEA Technology to carry out a further assessment of the site to identify chemical and mineral residues. The results of its desk study are expected by late summer. Field work and chemical analysis will then follow, if necessary.

Cormorants and Saw-billed Ducks

Sir Cranley Onslow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many applications for a licence to shoot cormorants and saw-billed ducks were received by his Department in the year 1995–6; how many of these were refused; how many birds were licensed to be shot; and how many have been reported as having been shot. [28293]

Mrs. Browning: The information requested is set out in the table for the period 1 May 1995 to 31 March 1996:

	Applications received[1]	*Applications refused*	*Applications granted*	*Number of birds licensed to be shot*	*Number of birds actually shot*[2]
Cormorants	90	32	52	341	121
Goosanders	25	19	5	19	2
Mergansers	1	1	—	—	—

[1] Some applications are still to be determined.
[2] Provisional figures.

BSE

Mr. Alan W. Williams: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many prosecutions there have been of *(a)* farmers, *(b)* cattle dealers, *(c)* auctioneers, *(d)* abattoir purchasers and *(e)* meat wholesalers concerning breaches of BSE regulations. [28529]

Mrs. Browning: One case has been successfully prosecuted under the Specified Bovine Offals Order 1995. The defendants were fined at total of £3,000 plus £2,000 costs for two offences under the order. There are no further cases before the court at present; a number of other cases are, however, under investigation.

Local government also plays a significant role in implementing the control measures on BSE. It is in part responsible for enforcing the Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy Order 1991, as amended, and the provisions of the new Specified Bovine Materials Order 1996 in relation to SBOs in non-food premises. We are aware that local authorities have taken several BSE-related prosecutions. We do not, however, hold details of these centrally.

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on *(a)* the incidence of BSE, *(b)* the steps in place to identify cases of BSE, *(c)* the steps taken to remove specified bovine offal from the carcases of animals believed to be affected and *(d)* the method by which the carcases of animals slaughtered because their herd was infected with BSE are disposed of in respect of each of the other EU countries; and what assessment he has made of the relative effectiveness of each country's programme to protect the public from BSE-related diseases. [28544]

Mrs. Browning: Up until 3 May 1996, 160,032 suspect cases of BSE have been reported in Great Britain. All suspect cases of BSE must, by law, be notified to the Ministry. The Ministry's veterinary officers visit all suspect animals to make a clinical diagnosis. Animals subsequently confirmed by the Ministry's veterinary officer as being suspected of suffering from BSE will be slaughtered on farm and their carcase disposed of by incineration. Specified bovine material is not removed from these animals as the whole carcase goes for disposal.

We do not have details of the preferred method of disposal of BSE suspect cases in other EU member states. Details of SBO controls in other EU member states were given in my response to my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury, (Mr. Key) on 29 April, *Official Report*, column, *413–14*.

Dr. Strang: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list all recommendations made since 1986 by the scientific committees advising the Government on spongiform encephalopathies, which have not been fully implemented. [23199]

Mrs. Browning *[holding answer 28 March 1996]:* There have been four reports published by the various advisory committees on transmissible spongiform encephalopathies since 1989.

Recommendations were made in both the "Report of the Working Party on Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (Southwood Report)" dated February 1989 and the "Interim Report (Tyrrell Report)" dated June 1989. The only recommendation made to Government which has not been implemented is a low-priority research recommendation for the survey of brains of cattle routinely sent for slaughter to monitor incidence of unrecognised infection, which was contained in the Tyrrell report. This recommendation was of course superseded by regulations which protected human health by the exclusion of specified bovine offals from the food chain.

The two later reports produced by the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee "Interim report on Research" dated April 1992 and the "Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies—A Summary of present Knowledge and Research" dated September 1994 contained no recommendations to Government. The interim report on research did, however, state that detailed examination of the relevant studies indicated that, in the Committee's view, there were no inappropriate overlaps; that all high-priority studies had been started, and that satisfactory progress had been made in implementing the recommendations of the interim report (Tyrrell report) (paragraph 4.1).

The committee has made a number of recommendations to Government on transmissible spongiform encephalopathies since the last set of published recommendations contained in the Tyrrell report were put to Government. The Government have acted swiftly to ensure that these recommendations were put in place with the minimum of delay.

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many BSE cases have been confirmed in animals aged less than 30 months old since 1988. [27978]

Mrs. Browning: Since 1986 and up to 3 May 1996, the number of BSE cases confirmed in animals less than 30 months in Great Britain is 80.

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what information he has evaluated on the distribution and timing of BSE infectivity in cattle before the final brain disease under farming conditions. [27979]

Mrs. Browning: All details on BSE infectivity have been published in the latest progress report. So far, from confirmed field cases, the BSE agent has been detected only in brain, cervical spinal cord, terminal spinal cord and retina. Under experimental conditions, infectivity has also been detected in the distal ileum of calves 18 months after challenge, but in no other tissues. Assays of tissues collected at later stages of that experiment are still in progress.

In the same study, CNS lesions were detected no more than three to four months before onset of clinical disease.

Feline Spongiform Encephalopathy

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many cases of cats suffering from spongiform encephalopathies have been reported to his Department in each of the last five years; and what research his Department has evaluated relating to future trends in the incidence of such diseases. [28590]

Mrs. Browning: The following table shows the numbers of cases of feline spongiform encephalopathy recorded in the United Kingdom until 8 May 1996:

	Number of cases
1990	13
1991	12
1992	10
1993	11
1994	16
1995	8
1996	1

Epidemiological studies are in progress but are incomplete. With the exception of one cat thought to be born in October 1990, none of the cases of feline spongiform encephalopathy confirmed in the United Kingdom are believed to have been born after the ban, in September 1990, on the use of specified bovine offals in animal feed.

These investigations are complicated by the difficulty in obtaining lifetime feeding and breeding histories for cats. This makes predicting the future trends difficult, although, at present, the shape of the epidemic appears to be similar to that of BSE.

Plympton Market

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will reopen the Plympton market as a collecting centre for the culling scheme. [29071]

Mr. Baldry: I understand that an application for approval of Plympton market under the scheme is being considered by the intervention board at the moment.

Fishing Grants

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the average length of time taken to process applications for grants awarded in England and Wales under the provisions of the fishing vessels (safety improvements) (grants) scheme each year from 1990 to 1995. [29153]

Mr. Baldry: The Sea Fish Industry Authority administers the fishing vessels (safety improvements) (grants) scheme on behalf of the Government. It does not keep detailed historic records of the time taken to deal with individual applications, but I understand that the average time taken to deal with an application, from receipt to formal approval, is estimated at four weeks.

Tanning Industry

Mr. Key: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what financial support will be provided to the tanning industry in the financial year 1996–97. [25135]

Mrs. Browning *[holding answer 16 April 1996]:* It is not the Government's intention that financial assistance should be specifically targeted at the tanning industry in this financial year.

Beef Heads

Mr. Key: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what financial support will be provided to plants licensed to process beef heads in the financial year 1996–97. [25134]

Mrs. Browning *[holding answer 16 April 1996]:* The Government sympathise with the cattle and head deboners whose traditional business has disappeared as a result of measures introduced on 29 March. However, as Ministers have made clear on a number of occasions, the purpose

of the financial assistance which has been made available to the slaughtering sector is to provide market support to keep the essential links in the beef supply chain operating while companies adjust to the changed market circumstances. It is not our policy to use public funds to compensate businesses for losses incurred. Against this background, we have concluded that no financial assistance can be offered to plants licensed to process beef heads, except the support available to all licensed slaughterhouses and licensed cutting premises in respect of unsold beef stocks.

Animal Welfare

Mr. Harry Greenway: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to improve the welfare of animals; and if he will make a statement. [27571]

Mrs. Browning *[holding answer 9 May 1996]:* We have action in hand across a wide range of animal welfare issues. For example, we are now developing our plans to implement the important new EU rules on the welfare of animals in transit which were secured by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury in June 1995; we are pressing hard, in the EU negotiations on the welfare of calves which we ourselves got brought forward, for an end to the veal crate throughout Europe; and we shall be pressing at the intergovernmental conference for a protocol to be added to the treaty, placing a legal obligation on the Community institutions to pay full regard to animal welfare when exercising their powers in relation to agriculture, transport, research and the single market.

Sea Empress Incident

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what information has been requested by the Environment Agency from his Department about the Sea Empress oil spillage; when that information was requested; and if he will place a copy of his Department's reply in the Library. [28864]

Mr. Baldry *[holding answer 10 May 1996]:* Primary responsibility for fisheries matters in relation to the Sea Empress oil spillage rests with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales. I refer the hon. Member to his reply of 10 May 1996, *Official Report*, column *301–02*.

Live Animal Exports

Mr. Morley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what procedures are taken to ensure that an animal rejected by a local veterinary inspector as unfit to travel on an export journey is not transported in Great Britain in a way which may cause it unnecessary suffering. [28627]

Mrs Browning *[holding answer 10 May 1996]:* There is a considerable variety of circumstances in which local veterinary inspectors may reject an animal as unfit for an export journey, and there is no basis for specifying a follow-up procedure which would be applicable in all cases. However, if an animal is unfit to travel, anyone who transported it, except in accordance with the Welfare of Animals during Transport Order 1994, would be committing an offence.

Mr Morley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many bovines were exported during 1994 and 1995 to *(a)* Northern Ireland, *(b)* the Republic of Ireland, *(c)* France, *(d)* Spain, *(e)* Italy, *(f)* Belgium, *(g)* Netherlands and *(h)* Greece. [28625]

Mrs. Browning *[holding answer 10 May 1996]:* Exports of bovine animals from the United Kingdom for 1994 and 1995 as recorded in the overseas trade statistics are as follows:

Number of head	*1994*[1]	*1995*[1]
Irish Republic	1,313	668
France	238,080	234,013
Spain	Nil	Nil
Italy	Nil	119
Belgium-Luxembourg	79,372	56,385
Netherlands	160,803	138,257
Greece	Nil	Nil

[1] Data provisional.

These overseas trade statistics record exports from the United Kingdom but not trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. However, figures collated from the computerised animal movement—ANIMO—database, which records animals certified for export, show that 18,340 and 25,044 bovines were exported from Great Britain to Northern Ireland in 1994 and 1995 respectively. These figures remain provisional, and subject to amendment.

Animal Feed

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will ensure there is an obligation on manufacturers of animal feed to declare a full list of ingredients. [28872]

Mrs. Browning *[holding answer 10 May 1996]:* Ingredients of compound animal feed must be declared either in full or by category. The Government are currently exploring whether the relevant EC directive should be changed.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 14 May 1996

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police (Housing Allowance)

Mr. Mills: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will introduce legislation to ensure consistent application of regulations relating to police officers' previous housing allowance where career breaks were taken prior to 1994. [28912]

Mr. Maclean: The application of the police regulations is a matter for police forces and police authorities. The regulations are clear about preserved entitlements to housing allowance for police officers who were appointed before 1 September 1994, including those who had been granted leave of absence for a career break. It would be for the Police Negotiating Board to consider in the first instance whether further amendment to the regulations was desirable and to make whatever recommendations to my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for the Home Department it considered appropriate.

Gardian Family (Llandudno)

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many representations he has received on behalf of the Gardian family of Llandudno, North Wales; and if he will make a statement. [28901]

Mr. Kirkhope: We have received representations on behalf of the Gardian family from 12 hon. Members, two noble Lords and numerous members of the public. I have considered the relevant factors in this case and have decided that in the light of all the particular circumstances deportation action is not appropriate.

Forensic Explosives Laboratory

Mr. Merchant: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the work of the forensic explosives laboratory. [29688]

Mr. Howard: On 14 March, explosives contamination was found in a centrifuge at the forensic explosives laboratory which is a part of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. The laboratory carried out a preliminary investigation and laid all the information before the Government in a formal report. A copy of that report has today been placed in the Library.

The forensic explosives laboratory's primary role is to provide scientific support to the police service and to provide expert witnesses for the Crown Prosecution Service in cases involving the criminal use of explosives. One of the services that it provides involves the laboratory analysis of swab samples taken to determine the presence of explosives and the type involved. This "trace" analysis involves a range of procedures, including the use in many cases of a centrifuge.

The explosives contamination involved a small amount, not more than 30 micrograms or 30 millionths of a gram, of the explosive RDX, one of the main components of the explosive Semtex. It was detected in a part of a laboratory centrifuge which was probably already contaminated on its arrival at the forensic explosives laboratory in 1989. By normal standards, the amount of explosive detected was tiny; nevertheless, it should not have been there.

The centrifuge involved was immediately taken out of operational action on discovery of this contamination and the trace laboratory thoroughly cleaned. No incidences of contamination from the centrifuge could, therefore, occur from that point on.

There is a small theoretical possibility that any casework sample showing RDX traces may have been affected by the centrifuge contamination. Regular quality assurance tests undertaken by the laboratory have not revealed RDX traces at a level which would suggest that casework samples are likely to have been contaminated but this cannot be ruled out completely. This may call into question evidence submitted by the FEL in criminal cases involving RDX.

On present information there may be around a dozen such cases which resulted in convictions, but the identification of all relevant cases and assessment of the possible risk of contamination are matters on which I want independent advice. I have therefore decided that an immediate independent review of the casework and procedures at the forensic explosives laboratory must take place. The terms of reference will require the reviewer:

(1) to report on the general likelihood of contamination being spread from the centrifuge to samples in the laboratory;

(2) to examine FEL papers on all cases in which RDX traces were found and a criminal conviction resulted and assess the likelihood of contamination;

(3) to examine FEL procedures in the trace laboratory and make recommendations.

Professor Brian Caddy, professor of forensic science at Strathclyde university, has agreed to undertake this review and will begin work shortly. He will report to me in the first instance, but the results and recommendations of his review will be made public.

As soon as it is clear which cases involved an RDX trace and resulted in a conviction, we will notify the representatives of those concerned.

Once the report has been completed, I will decide what further action should be taken, particularly with regard to any concerns raised about the possible contamination of casework samples which subsequently resulted in criminal convictions. If appropriate, I will consider whether particular cases should be referred to the Court of Appeal.

From the information currently available to me, it would appear that the risk of contamination is small, but in a matter of this sensitivity I am determined to act only on the basis of the most rigorous and independent scientific assessments. I will keep the House fully informed of the outcome of that scrutiny and the measures which flow from it.

Metropolitan Police (Inspector's Report)

Mr. Merchant: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement as police authority for the Metropolitan police on the recent report by Her Majesty's chief inspector of constabulary on Metropolitan police area 1. [29689]

Mr. Maclean: Yes. We have today placed in the Library a note of the recommendations from the report, together with the Commissioner's responses and the police authority responses, which takes into account the advice that my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary and I have received from the Metropolitan police committee.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

British Council

Mr. Litherland: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs from what source the redundancy payments for the employees of the British Council who lose their jobs will be funded. [28970]

Mr. Hanley: Redundancy payments and other compensation arrangements will be made by the British Council. The possibility of the Government helping the British Council with some of these restructuring costs is currently being considered in the context of the studies being carried out with the aim of avoiding overseas post closures.

St. Helena

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the recent attack on the Governor of St. Helena; and what assessment he has made of the cause of the incident. [29263]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: On 19 April a demonstration outside the castle in Jamestown was organised to press demands for increased social security benefits. A number—about 60 to 70—of those demonstrators forced their way into the Governor's office. They were eventually persuaded to leave: there was no damage to property or harm to the Government servants involved.

The ODA had sent an expert adviser on social security to St. Helena in March. He has recommended changes to the social security system on the island, which are being studied by the St. Helena Government.

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 23 April, *Official Report*, column *81*, if the review is considering the rights of civil servants on temporary contracts to maternity leave; and when he expects the reviews to be *(a)* completed and *(b)* published. [29264]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: The review of the unestablished work force in respect of maternity leave is now complete. A new order is in the process of being drafted for inclusion in the public service orders to make provision for unestablished females to be granted maternity leave. The order will be published by 1 June 1996.

MI6 (Pensions)

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to submit the administration of civil service pensions for employees of MI6 to *(a)* market testing and *(b)* privatisation. [29287]

Mr. Rifkind: There are no plans to do so.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Wembley Stadium (Disabled People)

Mr. Alfred Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what information her Department evaluated on access to Wembley stadium for disabled people; how it compared with such access to other major sporting venues; and if she will make a statement. [28658]

Mr. Sproat *[holding answer 13 May 1996]:* My Department has made no evaluation of Wembley stadium or compared it with other sporting venues. The provision of disabled facilities in existing stadiums is the responsibility of the management of the ground in question. The Government strongly support improvements in facilities for disabled spectators at sports grounds, and the Sports Council takes into account disabled access when distributing lottery funds for grounds and facilities. Also, the Disability Discrimination Act creates new rights of access for disabled people. The Act places a duty on service providers to make adjustments to the premises, where reasonable, in order to make them more accessible. My hon. Friend the Minister for the Disabled is currently analysing the results of a consultation on the timetable for implementing the rights of access.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Wasted Costs Orders

Mr. Donald Anderson: To ask the Attorney-General what considerations led to the omission of wasted costs orders from the annual reports of the Crown Prosecution Service. [28307]

The Attorney-General: Information on costs awarded against the prosecution is published in the departmental report of the Lord Chancellor's and Law Officers' Department, Cm. 3209, March 1996.

Mr. Anderson: To ask the Attorney-General how many wasted costs orders have been made by courts against the Crown Prosecution Service in the last accounting year, with the breakdown of each Crown Prosecution Service area and the total sums for such areas and further broken down by the Crown courts and the magistrates courts. [28306]

The Attorney-General: Wasted costs orders are usually so described—that is, orders against the legal or other representatives personally, pursuant to section 19A of the Prosecution of Offences Act 1985, are extremely rare in relation to representatives of the Crown Prosecution Service.

I have taken the hon. Member's question to refer to orders made under section 19(1) of the Prosecution of Offences Act 1985 and regulation 3 of the Costs in

Criminal Cases (General) Regulations 1986, being orders based on an unnecessary or improper act or omission for which the prosecution is held responsible, which can arise for a variety of reasons. The numbers of such orders recorded against the Crown Prosecution Service, broken down by each Crown Prosecution Service area, and further broken down by Crown court and magistrates courts, are set out in the table. The final column of the table shows the amounts actually paid out by the Crown Prosecution Service in the last accounting year. This information cannot be separated between sums paid in respect of orders made by magistrates courts and those made in the Crown court.

Costs awarded against the Crown Prosecution Service 1995–96

Area	*Number of costs awards against CPS*		*Amount paid £*
	Crown courts	*Magistrates' courts*	
North	2	19	3,102
Yorkshire	11	160	8,215
Mersey/Lancashire	11	6	3,259
Humber	9	6	22,827
North-west	5	14	9,363
East Midlands	20	39	18,347
Wales	10	4	5,108
Midlands	9	7	7,503
Anglia	6	16	12,637
Severn/Thames	16	16	16,798
South-west	4	4	2,227
London	111	95	63,804
South-east	13	26	19,528
Central casework	Not available	Not available	52,003
Total	227	412	244,721

1. Information is not available to establish the enactment under which the orders were made and awards of costs made otherwise than in accordance with the Prosecution of Offences Act 1985 may be included.

2. The information in relation to the number of awards is limited to Crown court and magistrates court cases. It does not include cost awards made in the higher court.

3. The number of awards relates to all cases dealt with by the CPS areas, but does not include any orders made in respect of the specialised work handled by central casework.

4. Information about the amounts actually paid includes payments in respect of orders made in the higher courts and those in respect of the specialised work handled by central casework, but the amounts paid cannot be broken down by type of court.

OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION

Police Training (ODA Funding)

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the projects or schemes under which the Overseas Development Agency has given funding to countries to finance training of their police officers *(a)* in the UK or *(b)* in their home countries. [29041]

Mr. Hanley: Assistance for police training under the aid programme is financed through the ODA's country aid programmes, whether the training takes place in the UK or in the trainee's home country.

Countries who received aid for in-country training from ODA under country aid programmes in 1994 and 1995 were:

1994

Albania
Anguilla
Bangladesh
Barbados
British Virgin Islands
Bulgaria
Cayman Islands
Czech Republic
Gambia
Hungary
India
Indonesia
Jamaica
Lesotho
Maldives
Montserrat
Namibia
Nepal
Nigeria
Pakistan
Poland
Romania
Russia
St. Helena
Sierra Leone
Slovak Republic
South Africa
Sri Lanka
Swaziland
Turks and Caicos Islands
Uganda

1995

Estonia
Latvia
Lithuania
Bangladesh
Botswana
Bulgaria
Cayman Islands
Czech Republic
Hungary
India
Jamaica
Kenya
Lesotho
Malawi
Namibia
Nepal
Nigeria
Pakistan
Palestinian Authority
Poland
Romania
Russia

St. Helena
St. Kitts and Nevis
Slovak Republic
South Africa
Sri Lanka
Swaziland
Uganda

Countries receiving police training in the UK in 1994 and 1995 under country aid programmes were listed in the answer given to the hon. Member on 28 February, *Official Report*, column *546*.

It would involve a disproportionate cost to collect this information for earlier years or by projects.

Nigeria

Sir Michael Grylls: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the Nigerian Government's political programme for the creation of a democracy in Nigeria; if he will list, with proposed dates, the main elements of that political programme; if he will indicate in the case of each of those dates which have passed whether the stated goal had been achieved, with particular reference to local government elections; and if he will list those targets within the programme which gave rise to the concerns about a lack of progress expressed by the Minister of State in his oral answer on 3 April, *Official Report*, column 373. [29079]

Mr. Hanley: A copy of the transition programme, as announced by the General Abacha on 1 October 1995, has been placed in the Library of the house.

We are not satisfied that the non-party elections held in March were free or fair. We are concerned by the introduction of new decrees which further extend the powers of the regime to control political activity and by the continued detention of opposition figures.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Probate Service

Mr. Boateng: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when his Department will be announcing its response to the recommendation of the report on the structure of the probate service of September 1994. [28395]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: The question concerns a specific operational matter on which the chief executive of the Court Service is best placed to provide an answer and I have accordingly asked the chief executive to reply direct.

Letter from M. D. Huebner to Mr. Paul Boateng, dated 14 May 1996:

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, has asked me to reply to your Question about the progress of the response to the Report on the Structure of the Probate Service.

The Principal Registry of the Family Division forwarded a submission to Court Service Headquarters on 9 May. The submission will shortly be forwarded to the Lord Chancellor for his consideration. The Lord Chancellor will make a decision on the proposals in due course.

TREASURY

Personal Alcohol Imports

Mr. George Howarth: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what restrictions apply to the importation of large quantities of alcohol from other EU countries in cases where the person importing the alcohol declares it to be for personal use; and what tests are applied to establish whether the alcohol is intended for personal use. [28690]

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Customs apply no restrictions to private importations of alcohol purchased duty paid in another EU country by travellers for their own use. The definition of "own use" and the conditions applying to relief of excise duty on personal importations are contained in the Excise Duty (Personal Reliefs) Order 1992. The main criteria applied by Customs to identify goods being imported for commercial purposes under the personal reliefs provisions are defined in paragraph 5 of the order.

Educational Trusts

Mr. Stewart: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he last met the School Fees Insurance Association concerning the taxation of educational trusts; and if he will make a statement. [28321]

Mr. Jack: Following the Charity Commissioners' recent decision that certain educational trusts are not truly charitable, I met representatives of the trusts concerned, including the SFIA, on 9 May, when I learned of the discussions they have been having with the Charity Commission and the Inland Revenue about ways of addressing current issues.

Income Tax

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what would be the yield of a 50 per cent. rate of tax starting at £50,000 and a 60 per cent. rate starting at £100,000; and how many taxpayers would be involved; [28314]

(2) what would be the yield of a 50 per cent. rate of tax starting at £50,000; and how many taxpayers would be involved; [28312]

(3) what would be the yield of 50 per cent. rate of tax starting at £100,000; and how many taxpayers would be involved. [28313]

Mr. Jack: Estimated full-year yields, 1996–97 income levels, are given in the table. The estimates of income tax yields do not take account of any behavioural effects which might result from the introduction of the increases in tax rates.

Lower limit of taxable income for the 50 per cent. rate £	*Full-year revenue yield[1] at 1996–97 income levels* £ *billion*	*Number of taxpayers affected* *Thousands*
50,000	2.3	450
100,000	1.1	110
50,000 (and with 60 per cent. rate above 100,000)	3.4	450

[1] including the consequential effects on the yield of capital gains tax after allowing for likely changes in the volume of disposals.

Mr. Timms: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will update his answer to the hon. Member for Edinburgh, South (Mr. Griffiths) of 31 October 1995, *Official Report*, columns *151–52*, on gross income and income tax liability by income band for 1996–97. [28581]

Mr. Jack: Available estimates are given in the table. It is not possible to provide reliable estimates for the specified bands of income above £100,000, nor is it possible to incorporate the detailed effect of mortgage interest relief which, in total, reduces income tax liability by £1.2 billion for taxpayers included in the table.

1996–97	*Gross income*[1] *£ millions*	*Income tax liability*[2] *£ millions*	*Number of taxpayers (thousands)*
£20,000 to £30,000	97,500	17,200	4,100
£30,000 to £40,000	42,200	8,750	1,200
£40,000 to £50,000	20,100	4,920	450
£50,000 to £60,000	12,100	3,250	220
£60,000 to £70,000	7,220	2,070	110
£70,000 to £80,000	5,630	1,680	80
£80,000 to £90,000	4,020	1,240	50
£90,000 to £100,000	2,630	830	30
£100,000+	25,600	8,910	130

[1] Gross income is defined as total income for income tax purposes. It excludes income from certain social security benefits and some investment income such as National Savings Certificates.
[2] Not taking account of mortgage interest relief.

Mr. Timms: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will update his answer to the hon. Member for Edinburgh, South (Mr. Griffiths) of 6 November 1995, *Official Report*, column *537*, to 1996–97 on the average tax allowances and reliefs for those with gross earnings up to £120,000, differentiating between reliefs and allowances claimed (i) at the marginal rate and (ii) at other rates. [28580]

Mr. Jack: Available estimates for taxpayers in 1996–97 are in the table. It is not possible to provide reliable estimates for the specified bands above £100,000.

Gross income range £ per year	*Average amount of tax reliefs and allowances claimed at marginal rates set against income £*	*Average amount of tax reliefs and allowances claimed at other rates, set against income £*
0–10,000	4,100	650
10,000–20,000	4,400	1,400
20,000–30,000	4,800	2,300
30,000–40,000	5,300	2,700
40,000–50,000	6,100	2,800
50,000–60,000	6,700	2,850
60,000–70,000	7,200	2,950
70,000–80,000	7,900	2,900
80,000–90,000	8,300	2,950
90,000–100,000	9,000	3,000
Over 100,000	13,900	3,100
Average	4,500	1,400

Mr. Timms: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will update his answer to the hon. Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn) of 4 May 1995, *Official Report*, columns *262–63*, to provide estimates for 1996—97 for the number of taxpayers with gross and taxable income in income bands up to £150,000, supplying data at intervals of not more than £10,000. [28582]

Mr. Jack: Available estimates are given in the table. It is not possible to provide reliable estimates for the specified bands of income above £100,000.

1996–97	*Number of taxpayers by range of Gross income*[1] *(thousands)*	*Taxable income*[2] *(thousand)*
Under £5,000	1,400	8,100
£5,000 to £10,000	7,800	6,500
£10,000 to £15,000	6,000	4,500
£15,000 to £20,000	4,200	2,900
£20,000 to £25,000	2,700	1,500
£25,000 to £30,000	1,400	770
£30,000 to £40,000	1,200	750
£40,000 to £50,000	450	300
£50,000 to £60,000	220	150
£60,000 to £70,000	110	80
£70,000 to £80,000	80	50
£80,000 to £90,000	50	30
£90,000 to £100,000	30	20
Over £100,000	130	110
Total	25,800	25,800

[1] Gross income is defined as total income for income tax purposes. It excludes income from certain social security benefits and some investment income such as national savings certificates.
[2] Taxable income is defined as gross income for income tax purposes less those allowance and reliefs which are available at the taxpayer's marginal rate.

National Debt

Mr. Thurnham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his latest estimate of the national debt for the end of the current fiscal year; and what the figures were for each of the last seven years. [28858]

Mr. Waldegrave: New forecasts for debt will be published in the summer economic forecast on 9 July. The table contains the information requested.

Net debt £ billion[1] [2]

1988–89: 155.8

1989–90: 150.0

1990–91: 153.6

1991–92: 167.2

1992–93: 204.5

1993–94: 251.7

1994–95: 290.8

[1] At end March.
[2] First estimate for end-March 1996 will be published in the summer economic forecast on 9 July.

Tobacco Products

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what measures are being proposed by Her Majesty's Government to create greater tax harmonisation on tobacco products within the European Union. [29163]

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: The Government will continue to take every opportunity to press the case for higher minimum rates of excise duty on tobacco products.

Welsh Language Birth Certificates

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to make available birth

certificates in the Welsh language for babies of Welsh parentage born in England; and if he will make a statement. [28902]

Mrs. Angela Knight: There are no immediate plans to make available birth certificates in the Welsh language for Welsh babies born in England.

The White Paper "Registration: proposals for change", Cm 939, published in 1990, recommended that such events be registered in a bilingual—Welsh and English—register held by the Registrar General from which certificates could be issued when required. The Government remain committed to implementing the White Paper proposals when parliamentary time permits.

Inland Revenue (National Insurance Charts)

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many complaints the Inland Revenue has received regarding late delivery to small firms of charts for calculating national insurance contributions of employees. [28747]

Mr. Jack *[holding answer 13 May 1996]:* The Inland Revenue head office, which had responsibility for monitoring the west midlands combined pack trial, received one complaint about the late arrival of material.

PRIME MINISTER

Isle of Skye (Visit)

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Prime Minister if he has any plans to pay an official visit to the Isle of Skye. [28020]

The Prime Minister: I have no plans to do so.

Engagements

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Tuesday 14 May. [28291]

The Prime Minister: This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further meetings later today.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Unemployment Benefit

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people have *(a)* been refused unemployment benefit and *(b)* had their unemployment benefit reduced under section 30 of the Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992. [29179]

Mr. Roger Evans: The number of unemployed claimants in Great Britain on 10 August 1995 who had their unemployment benefit reduced under section 30 of the Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992 was 17,000. Of these, 8,000 had their unemployment benefit fully abated.

Source:

5 per cent. sample of unemployed claimants in Great Britain taken on 10 August 1995.

Suspension of Benefits

Mr. Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many awards of benefit he has suspended under regulation 37 of the Social Security (Claims and Payments) Regulations 1987 in each year since 1990. [29383]

Mr. Roger Evans: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Cunninghame, South (Mr. Donohoe) on 10 May, *Official Report,* columns *277–78.*

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Independent Schools

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many independent schools there are in the United Kingdom; and how many are registered as having charitable status. [29068]

Mrs. Gillan: There are currently 2,275 independent schools in England registered with this Department. Of those, 1,323 have informed us that they have charitable status. Questions regarding independent schools elsewhere in the United Kingdom should be addressed to my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Scotland, and for Wales and my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Drugs (School Inspectors)

Mr. Rathbone: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what provision is made to ensure that schools inspectors are able properly to assess the efficiency of a school's drugs policy and drugs education performance. [29307]

Mr. Robin Squire: This is a matter for Her Majesty's chief inspector of schools, who heads the Office for Standards in Education. I have asked Mr. Chris Woodhead to write to my hon. Friend.

Hurworth School

Mr. Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the total cost of the inquiry into allegations of misinformation concerning the ballot on grant-maintained status at Hurworth school; and if she will publish the evidence collected during the course of this inquiry. [29178]

Mrs. Gillan: Costs to the Department of the investigation are part of normal running costs and cannot readily be calculated as they involve a range of staff who also have other responsibilities. The evidence collected during the course of investigations into ballots for grant-maintained status is not published. Those who provide evidence may prefer their comments not to be made public. In the case of the investigation concerning Hurworth school, some respondents specifically asked that their evidence be treated in confidence.

University Funding

Mr. Alfred Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations she has had on the need to restore the capital allowance for

university equipment and minor works and on the need for stability in the level of funding received per student; what replies have been sent; what action she is taking; and if she will make a statement. [28662]

Mr. Forth: My right hon. Friend has received a large number of representations about higher education funding. The UK HE sector is currently receiving £7 billion in public funding, 20 per cent. of the funding for education as a whole. That is a large sum, and a substantial share of available resources. We are working with the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals and other HE bodies to collate evidence about the effects of levels of public funding on universities, and to consider the private finance initiative in HE.

Job Clubs

Mr. Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many professional and executive job clubs have been closed in the last two years; and in which areas. [28900]

Mr. Forth: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its chief executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Mike Fogden to Mr. Michael Meacher, dated 14 May 1996:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question about Jobclubs. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

The Employment Service currently maintains a network of 1,338 Jobclubs throughout the country. This will provide places for around 204,000 unemployed people during 1996/97. This includes a number of specialist Jobclubs for particular groups of people including a number catering for the needs of unemployed executive and professional job seekers.

Decisions about the type and location of Jobclubs are made by my 154 District managers who are responsible for the delivery of the full range of Employment Service programmes within their Districts. Wherever possible they will seek to maintain a network of Jobclubs which will be accessible to the vast majority of our clients and take into account the circumstances of the local labour market. In many locations this may mean that a standard Jobclub is provided which is able to cater for a broad range of clients, including professional and executive job seekers. You may be interested to know that research has shown that 16% of the people who leave all Jobclubs to start work, take up professional and managerial positions.

Information about the number and location of executive Jobclub closures is not collected routinely. However, regional totals of the number and type of Jobclub are collected at the end of each quarter. I have therefore attached a table showing the total number of executive Jobclubs in each region on the quarter ending dates between March 1994 and March 1996.

You will note that the number of executive Jobclubs has fluctuated during the period, reflecting changing labour markets and client needs in different locations. In addition the fluctuation in the numbers will be due to different patterns of contract tendering in each region during the operational years.

You will note that there are currently around 128 executive Jobclubs which represents some 10% of the total network.

Jobclubs remain successful and in 1995/96 helped over 95,000 unemployed people find jobs.

I hope this is helpful.

Number of executive jobclubs by region
Quarter ending figures 1994–1996

Region	*March 1994*	*June 1994*	*September 1994*	*December 1994*	*March 1995*	*June 1995*	*September 1995*	*December 1995*	*March 1996*
Northern	10	8	8	9	11	9	8	8	7
Yorkshire and Humberside	11	7	10	9	10	10	12	11	12
East Midlands and Eastern	19	19	19	19	20	19	14	15	14
London and South East	46	55	53	79	65	49	60	53	43
South West	19	14	18	20	18	19	16	14	13
Wales	8	8	8	6	6	4	5	5	5
West Midlands	15	16	16	16	15	16	16	15	14
North West	14	14	12	11	10	8	10	10	10
Scotland	10	9	10	10	9	10	10	10	10
Total executive jobclubs	154	149	154	179	164	144	151	141	128
Total all types jobclub	1,461	1,373	1,446	1,443	1,389	1,345	1,423	1,398	1,338

Grant-maintained Special Schools

Mr. Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many grant-maintained special schools have admitted pupils who do not have a statement of special educational needs. [29204]

Mrs. Gillan: Most special schools, whether local education authority-maintained or grant-maintained, may admit pupils without statements of special educational need in certain circumstances. The latest available data on the number of pupils and statements relate to January 1995, when there were two grant-maintained special schools. Both had admitted pupils without statements.

Mr. Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many grant-maintained special schools have admitted pupils who have statements which do not name that grant-maintained school. [29205]

Mrs. Gillan: The Department does not collect this information. Admissions to grant-maintained special schools are the responsibility of the governors, subject to admissions arrangements approved by the Secretary of State.

Primary Teacher Training

Mr. Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what percentage of entrants to primary teacher training have had qualifications above GCSE or O-level in English in each of the last five years; [29206]

(2) what percentage of entrants to primary teacher training have had qualifications above GCSE or O-level in science in each of the last five years; [29207]

(3) what percentage of entrants to primary teacher training have had qualifications above GCSE or O-level in mathematics in each of the last five years. [29208]

Mr. Robin Squire: This information is not collected centrally.

Office Space

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will list the square footage and cost of office space rented by her Department and its agencies and the number of her Department or agencies' buildings partly, or fully unoccupied together with the square footage of that unoccupied office space and its estimated rental value where available in each of the past five financial years. [27734]

Mr. Robin Squire *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* The following tables contain the information available for the DfEE estate, including all headquarters buildings and outstations. The estimated costs for occupied properties include rent, rates and service charge.

Occupied DfEE leasehold properties

	DfEE HO and outstations	*Employment service agency*
Area = sq ft for 1995–96	621,831	8,914,290
Estimated cost 1991–92	Not available	£44,920,494
Estimated cost 1992–93	Not available	£57,781,989
Estimated cost 1993–94	£29,051,367	£62,285,889
Estimated cost 1994–95	£29,249,929	£59,331,224
Estimated cost 1995–96	£27,625,884	£56,004,487

Surplus/partly vacant DfEE leasehold properties

	DfEE HO and Outstations	*Employment Service Agency*
Number of properties in 1995–96	21	126
Area= sq ft for 1995–96	183,039	904,176
Estimated rental value 1991–92	Not available	Not available
Estimated rental value 1992–93	Not available	Not available
Estimated rental value 1993–94	£1,965,793	Not available
Estimated rental value 1994–95	1,704,930	Not available
Estimated rental value 1995–96	2,303,885	4,022,276

TRANSPORT

Jubilee Line

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what estimate he has made of the final cost of the Jubilee line extension; and if he will make a statement. [28643]

Mr. Norris: I understand from London Underground Ltd. that it estimates the final outturn cash cost of the Jubilee line extension to be approximately £2.1 billion.

Tottenham Court Road

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he estimates that the present road works in Tottenham Court road will be completed. [29142]

Mr. Norris: The London borough of Camden is the highway authority responsible for the works in Tottenham Court road. Officers at the borough expect the works to be completed by 15 May 1996.

London Regional Transport

Mr. Keith Hill: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the non-executive directors he and his predecessors have appointed to the board of London Regional Transport, giving their main occupations. [28593]

Mr. Norris: The information requested, giving the main occupation at the time of appointment, is as follows:

Name	*Main occupation on appointment*
Mr. Keith Brown	Partner, W. Greenwell and Co.
Miss Eileen Cole	Chairman and Chief Executive of Research International (Unilever Ltd.)
Dr. Stephen Glaister	Cassell Reader in Economics with special reference to Transport at the London School of Economics
Sir David Hardy	Directorships—Waterford Glass Group, The Agricultural Mortgage Corporation, Electra Investments (Zimbabwe) Ltd., Effold Properties Ltd., Rothesay Trust Ltd., Carya Pecans Inc., Rowton Hotels plc
Mr. S. Jenkins	Directorships—Faber and Faber Publishers, Municipal Journal Ltd.
Mr. Kenneth Joyner	Managing Director, Worldwide Estates Ltd. and other private property companies
Mrs. Helen Robinson	Group Style Director, Debenhams
Miss Patricia Steel	Secretary of the Institution of Highways and Transportation; Director and Company Secretary, Seaway Court (Torquay) Ltd.
Sir Neil Shields	Chairman of the Commission for New Towns
Mr. Oscar Roith	Retired
Mr. Roy Thomas	Finance Director, Fisons plc
Mr. David Thompson	Chairman, Rank Xerox (UK)
Sir Alan Bailey	Retired
Mr. Keith Davies	Retired
Mr. Robert Dorey	Retired
Mrs. Rosemary Day	Operations Director, Allied Dunbar
Mr. Michael Lawrence	Chief Executive, the London Stock Exchange
Ms Sally O'Sullivan	Editor-in-Chief, 'Good Housekeeping'
Mr. Brian Appleton	Retired
Mr. Robert Chase	Group Managing Director, the Automobile Association

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Ms Anderson) of 30 April, *Official Report,* column *444* on revenue spending under the private finance initiative, if he will reconcile the figures in that answer with those for spending on design, build, finance and operate road schemes in his Department's transport report 1996, Cm. 3206; and if he will provide a breakdown of these figures for each year for 1995–96 to 1997–98. [29220]

Mr. Watts: The figures given in my answer of 30 April to the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Ms Anderson) were current estimates of the revenue

spend by my Department on all private finance initiative projects, not design, build, finance and operate road schemes alone.

Air Traffic Control

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list the regulations on the award of contracts for local air traffic control in the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement on the criteria upon which the contracts tendered this year for Glasgow airport and Edinburgh airport will be awarded. [29341]

Mr. Norris: Provision of air traffic control services in the UK must be in line with approvals granted by the Civil Aviation Authority under article 77 of the Air Navigation (No. 2) Order 1995. Before it grants such approvals, the authority must satisfy itself that the applicant is competent to provide a safe service, having regard to organisation, staffing, equipment, maintenance and other matters. Any air traffic controllers employed by the applicant must also obtain a licence from the authority under the terms of article 81 of the order.

The criteria for awarding the ATC supply contracts for Glasgow and Edinburgh airports are a matter for BAA plc, the owner of both airports.

Railways (Disabled Access)

Ms Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport on which rail lines wheelchair users are required to travel in the guard's van; and if he will make a statement. [23187]

Mr. Watts: The necessity for wheelchair users to travel in the guard's van is becoming increasingly rare. The extent to which train operating companies operate accessible trains in which wheelchair users are carried in the passenger saloon is as follows:

Anglia Railway Train Services Ltd. All trains used are accessible.

Cardiff Railway Co. Ltd. The company hires one inaccessible loco-hauled train from a private company. It is used to make one journey and back from the valleys to Cardiff on Mondays to Fridays at peak times. Otherwise the company operates an entirely accessible fleet of diesel Sprinters and Pacers.

Central Trains Ltd. Central Trains mostly operates accessible modern electric trains and Sprinters. They have a few inaccessible electric multiple unit trains used on CENTRO, West Midland Passenger Transport Executive, services in and around Birmingham and on a few services between Birmingham and Liverpool.

Chiltern Railway Co. Ltd. All trains used are accessible.

CrossCounty Trains Ltd. All trains used are accessible.

Gatwick Express Ltd. All trains used are accessible.

Great Eastern Railway Ltd. Operates almost exclusively accessible modern EMUs but has a few older inaccessible EMUs that mostly operate only in the Monday to Friday morning and evening peak periods between Liverpool Street and Clacton.

Great Western Trains Co. Ltd. All trains used are accessible.

InterCity East Coast Ltd. All trains used are accessible.

InterCity West Coast Ltd. All trains used are accessible.

Island Line Ltd. All trains used are accessible.

LTS Rail Ltd. Currently operates a fleet comprised of inaccessible older EMUs.

Merseyrail Electrics Ltd. All trains used are accessible.

Midland Main Line Ltd. All trains used are accessible.

Network SouthCentral Ltd. Use modern accessible EMUs on their suburban routes but have traditional inaccessible "Southern Region" EMUs on their routes to Brighton, Eastbourne, East Grinstead etc.

North London Railways Ltd. All main services are operated with modern accessible EMUs. There are just seven inaccessible diesel multiple unit trains used on branch line services between Bletchley–Bedford, Gospel Oak–Barking and Willesden Junction–Clapham Junction.

North West Regional Railways Ltd. Operates almost entirely with a modern fleet of accessible diesel Sprinters and Pacers. Trains between Crewe and Holyhead are formed of old loco-hauled trains that have been converted so as to be accessible. Some suburban trains in and around Greater Manchester are formed of older inaccessible DMUs and EMUs.

Regional Railways North East Ltd. Operates almost entirely with a modern fleet of accessible diesel Sprinters and Pacers. Modern accessible EMUs are used on a local service between Doncaster and Leeds. Local trains between Leeds/Bradford and Ilkley/Skipton are operated on behalf of the West Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive using older inaccessible EMUs.

ScotRail Railways Ltd. Operates almost entirely with a fleet of accessible diesel Sprinters and accessible EMUs. Some inaccessible older DMUs and EMUs are used on suburban services in and around Edinburgh and Glasgow; in the latter on behalf of Strathclyde Passenger Transport Executive. Last summer, ScotRail also hired one inaccessible loco-hauled train from a private company that was used for one round trip each day between Inverness and Edinburgh.

South Wales and West Railway Ltd. Operate almost entirely with a fleet of accessible modern Sprinters. Hire one older inaccessible loco-hauled train from a private company which is mostly used in summer for one round trip between Bristol and Weymouth on a route that is otherwise served by accessible trains.

South West Trains Ltd. Use modern accessible EMUs on their suburban routes. Also have modern accessible trains on many services to Portsmouth, Bournemouth, Weymouth and Exeter, However still also run some inaccessible older "Southern Region" style EMUs on these routes.

Thameslink All trains used are accessible.

Thames Trains Ltd. All trains used are accessible.

The South Eastern Train Co. Ltd. Uses modern accessible EMUs on its suburban routes but has traditional inaccessible "Southern Region" EMUs on its routes to Hastings and Kent coast.

West Anglia Great Northern Railway Ltd. All trains used are accessible.

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what guidance he has given to the franchise director in respect of train operating companies guaranteeing disabled access to train. [25503]

Mr. Watts *[pursuant to his answer, 23 April 1996, c. 76]:* None. The Rail Regulator is responsible for protecting the interests of disabled rail passengers. All train and station operators are required to submit for the regulator's approval, a disabled people's protection policy, as a condition of being granted a licence to operate. Details of the accessibility of rolling stock were set out in my answer to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Ms Short) today.

"Rail Travel for Disabled Passengers"

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he expects that a new edition of the pamphlet, "Rail Travel for Disabled Passengers", covering the period after 1 June 1996 will be published. [29061]

Mr. Watts: The new edition of "Rail Travel for Disabled Passengers", covering the period from 2 June to 31 December 1996, will be published shortly and made available by 2 June.

DEFENCE

GEC Defence Projects

Mr. George: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what were *(a)* the out-turn prices and *(b)* the estimated prices at the time of Ministry of Defence approval, *(c)* the actual time and *(d)* the estimated time of completion in respect of each defence project valued at over £50 million undertaken for the Ministry of Defence since 1979 by GEC, where (i) GEC was the prime contractor and (ii) GEC was a member of a consortium with joint and several liability. [28639]

Mr. Arbuthnot: This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Cadet Forces

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his oral answer of 7 May, *Official Report*, columns *10–11*, what were, in each of the last five years, the number of air training corps cadets, the resources made available for ATC cadet training and the flying time per cadet; and if he will make a statement as to the current planned provision of flying instruction. [28904]

Mr. Soames: The number of enrolled air training corps cadets and the resources made available for ATC training in the last five years is as follows:

	1991–92	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*
Number of enrolled air cadets	34,606	35,296	35,551	35,488	[1]34,861
ATC budget (cash costs) £ million	16.2	18.4	19.0	19.8	21.0

[1] Averaged over three quarters.

The average cadet flying sortie in the last five years was some 29 minutes. Not all air cadets fly on an annual basis, while others take more than one flight. Under current planned provision for flying instruction, each air cadet will continue to have the opportunity to fly once a year.

Low Flying

Mr. Home Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many confirmed breaches of low flying regulations occurred at Caerlaverock in Dumfries and Galloway, in each of the last three years; how many of such breaches led to formal disciplinary proceedings; and what is being done to reduce the number of breaches in that area. [28714]

Mr. Soames: The numbers of breaches of the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust avoidance area at Caerlaverock confirmed by RAF police investigations in each of the last three years are as follows. One alleged breach in 1995 is still under investigation.

1993: 12

1994: 22

1995: 15.

In four of the incidents in 1994, the aircraft concerned were also found to have breached regulations by flying in low flying area 16 of the United Kingdom low flying system without proper authorisation.

Formal disciplinary action under the service discipline Acts has not, to date, been taken as a result of any of the breaches listed.

Measures have been taken to reduce the number of breaches of the avoidance area. The site has been granted permanent avoidance status, thereby ensuring that it is marked on navigation charts and aircraft moving map displays, and instructions have also been issued at senior level reminding air crew of the need to ensure observance of all avoidance areas, including Caerlaverock, and the possible consequences of not doing so.

Tornado and Hercules Contracts

Mr. Spellar: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects to make a statement about the final cost to his Department of the contracts awarded to Airwork for the Tornado F3 and Hercules. [29225]

Mr. Arbuthnot: In respect of the work performed on Tornado F3 aircraft, my Department is continuing to pursue the claim which it has lodged against Bricom Group Ltd., the then owners of Airwork, to recover the costs of repairing damaged aircraft and the Departments' other consequential costs. It is not yet possible to say when a settlement will be reached.

The damage which occurred to Hercules aircraft during work undertaken by Airwork was rectified by Shorts—the new owners of Airwork—at their own expense. All the affected aircraft have been returned to RAF service.

Manufacturing Projects

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the military defence manufacturing projects now taking place between member states of the Western European Union, indicating the value to the United Kingdom of each project. [28973]

Mr. Arbuthnot: I refer the hon. Member to table 10 on page 66 of the "Statement on the Defence Estimates 1996", which includes details of collaborative projects between the United Kingdom and other member states of the Western European Union. Apart from the projects that are in development and production, manufacturing work is still continuing to produce spares for equipment that is currently in service; the value to the United Kingdom of these projects could be provided only at disproportionate cost. However, the total costs of many of these projects are included in the "Major Projects Report 1994," a copy of which is in the Library of the House.

Table 10: Collaborative projects involving the United Kingdom at 1 April 1996

Projects in production or in-service	*Australia*	*Belgium*	*Canada*	*Denmark*	*France*	*Germany*	*Greece*	*Iceland*
Naval Equipment								
Sea Gnat Decoy System				*				
NATO Ships Inertial Navigation System			*					
Barra Sonobuoy	*							
Land Equipment								
FH70 Howitzer						*		
M483A1 Artillery Shell								
Combat Vehicle Reconnaissance (Tracked)								
Multiple Launch Rocket System Phase I					*	*		
Multiple Launch Rocket System Phase II								
M3 Amphibious Bridging System						*		
Missiles								
Sidewinder Air-to-Air						*		
Milan Anti-Tank (including improvements)					*	*		
Air Systems								
Jaguar					*			
Lynx					*			
Puma					*			
Gazelle					*			
Tornado					*			
Harrier AV8B GR3 7						*		
EH101 Merlin Helicopter								
RTM322-Helicopter Engine					*			
Joint Tactical Information Distribution System								
Other Equipment								
Navstar Global Positioning System (GPS)		*	*	*	*	*	*	*

Projects in Production or In-Service	*Italy*	*Netherlands*	*Norway*	*Portugal*	*Spain*	*Turkey*	*USA*
Naval equipment							
Sea Gnat Decoy System							*
NATO Ships Inertial Navigation System		*			*		
Barra Sonobuoy							
Land equipment							
FH70 Howitzer	*						
M483A1 Artillery Shell		*				*	*

Projects in Production or In-Service	Italy	Netherlands	Norway	Portugal	Spain	Turkey	USA
Combat Vehicle Reconnaissance (Tracked)							
Multiple Launch Rocket System Phase I	*						*
Multiple Launch Rocket System Phase II							
M3 Amphibious Bridging System							
Missiles							
Sidewinder Air-to-Air	*		*				
Milan Anti-Tank (including improvements)							
Air System							
Jaguar							
Lynx							
Puma							
Gazelle							
Tornado	*						
Harrier AV8B GR5/7							*
EH101 Merlin Helicopter	*						
RTM322 Helicopter Engine							
Joint Tactical Information Distribution System							*
Other equipment							
Navstar Global Positioning System (GPS)	*	*	*	*	*	*	*

Projects in the development phase	Australia	Belgium	Canada	Denmark	France	Germany	Greece	Iceland
Naval equipment								
Intercooled Recuperated (ICR) Gas Turbine Engine								
Land equipment								
COBRA (Counter Battery Radar)					*	*		
Aimed Control Effect Anti-Tank Mine					*	*		
Missiles								
Long range TRIGAT(Third Generation Anti-Tank Guided Weapon)					*	*		
Medium range TRIGAT(Third Generation Anti-Tank Guided Weapon)		*			*	*		
Air systems								
Eurofighter						*		
Other equipment								
ADA Computer Language ProjectSupport Environment			*	*	*	*		
Universal Modem for Satellite Communications								
Allied Data Systems Interoperability Agency—NATO Procedural Interoperability Standards					*	*		

Projects in the development phase	Italy	Netherlands	Norway	Portugal	Spain	Turkey	USA
Naval equipment							
Intercooled Recuperated (ICR) Gas Turbine Engine							*
Land equipment							
COBRA (Counter Battery Radar)							
Aimed Control Effect Anti-Tank Mine							
Missiles							
Long range TRIGAT							
Medium range TRIGAT(Third Generation Anti-Tank Guided Weapon)		*					

Projects in the development phase	Italy	Netherlands	Norway	Portugal	Spain	Turkey	USA
Air systems							
Eurofighter	*				*		
Other equipment							
ADA Computer Language ProjectSupport Environment	*	*	*		*		*
Universal Modem for Satellite Communications							*
Allied Data Systems Interoperability Agency—NATO Procedural Interoperability Standards		*	*		*		*

Consultants

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the total cost to date of the employment of consultants for his Department's married housing quarters sell-off. [29342]

Mr. Arbuthnot: Further to my answer of 19 December 1995, *Official Report*, columns *114–15*, the total cost to date of the employment of consultants since we began to develop the proposal to transfer the married quarters estate to the private sector announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence on 30 November 1995, *Official Report*, columns *810–11*, amounts to some £3.5 million, exclusive of VAT, on the basis of invoices received by the end of April.

Chemical and Defence Establishment

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what work has been carried out at the chemical and defence establishment, Porton Down, to assess whether and how LSD could be used in interrogations; what were the conclusions of this work; and if he will make a statement. [29344]

Mr. Arbuthnot: This is a matter for the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency under its framework document. I have asked the chief executive, DERA, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Chisholm to Dr. David Clarke, dated 14 May 1996:

I have been asked to reply to your question about the possible use of LSD in interrogations at the Chemical and Biological Establishment (CBDE) as Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) which now includes the former CBDE in one of its divisions.

The Chemical and Biological Defence Sector (CBD) of what is now known as the Protection and Life Sciences Division (PLSD) at Porton Down has no record of any work being carried out to assess whether and how LSD could be used in interrogations. The work which was undertaken at Porton Down was aimed at ascertaining the effects of LSD on service personnel in operational circumstances.

I hope this is helpful.

Army Training (Video)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement concerning the release of video footage of Army training by the Northern Ireland training advisory team. [29343]

Mr. Soames: Video tapes used to debrief soldiers during pre-Northern Ireland training were passed by the BBC to the Ministry of Defence on 8 May; they had apparently been bought by a third party in Coventry. Urgent steps are being taken to prevent any recurrence of this incidence, and a full assessment of any implications for current military operations in Northern Ireland is being made.

As a police investigation is now in hand it would be inappropriate to comment further.

The continued safety of our troops in Northern Ireland is of paramount importance.

Baltic Peacekeeping Battalion

Sir Peter Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assistance the United Kingdom will continue to give to support the development of the Baltic peacekeeping battalion. [29528]

Mr. Soames: The UK, together with other NATO allies—Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and the USA—and Sweden and Finland, has been involved in the training and development of the Baltic peacekeeping battalion since 1994. This programme, which includes English language training and training by the Royal Marines in basic infantry skills, will continue until late 1997. In addition to training provision, the UK—as part of an international equipment package—has provided 38 Carl Gusav anti-tank weapons to the peacekeeping battalion. These weapons are surplus to UK requirements and are non-offensive weapons suited for defensive purposes in a peacekeeping environment. These will be delivered today.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Fish Quotas

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the Government will table proposals in Brussels *(a)* to stop quota hopping and *(b)* to increase British quotas for the United Kingdom fishing industry. [28915]

Mr. Baldry: I refer my right hon. Friend to the statement made by my right hon. Friend the Minister in the House on 5 March *Official Report*, column 130. The Government intend to table proposals to address the problem of quota hopping at an appropriate stage in the intergovernmental conference.

Feedstuff Ingredients

Mr. Home Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) if he will list the categories of *(a)* feedstuffs and *(b)* additives permitted for

sale for feeding to (i) cattle, (ii) sheep, (iii) pigs and (iv) poultry, indicating the regulations applying to each category; [28712]

(2) if he will list the categories of *(a)* foodstuffs and *(b)* additives permitted for sale for feeding to fish for human consumption, indicating which regulations apply to each category. [29067]

Mrs Browning: There is no list of permitted food ingredients for animals, including fish. However, the Feeding Stuffs Regulations 1995, S.I. 1412, contain detailed provisions on the composition and labelling of feedingstuffs and a list of permitted feed additives. A copy of the regulations is in the Library of the House.

Specified Bovine Materials (Handling)

Mr. Peter Atkinson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what were the results of the state veterinary service's visits to abattoirs to monitor the handling of specified bovine materials in the period January to April 1996; and if he will make a statement. [29687]

Mr Douglas Hogg: The State Veterinary Service is continuing its programme of unannounced visits to all plants handling specified bovine material. In the first four months of 1996, 1,196 visits to abattoirs have been recorded. Of these, 1,148 or 96 per cent. found the handling of SBM to be fully satisfactory. Of the four per cent. of cases where deficiencies were reported, not all—for instance, poor record keeping—presented a risk to public or animal health. There were only four incidents recorded where pieces of spinal cord had not been completely removed from the spinal canal. No such incidents have been reported since 20 March, some seven weeks ago.

I will ensure that a note is placed in the Library of the House regularly to update these figures.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Skills Audit

Mr. Byers: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister on what dates he has received written representations from the Secretary of State for Education and Employment about the skills audit. [28954]

The Deputy Prime Minister: The Secretary of State and I have worked together closely on the audit since it was announced in the last competitiveness White Paper.

Mr. Byers: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 7 May, *Official Report*, column *113*, which department is responsible for conducting the skills audit; with which countries the United Kingdom's skills level and performance will be compared; if it will include consideration of the performance of the Untied Kingdom schools system; and if he will make a statement. [28943]

The Deputy Prime Minister: The skills audit has been conducted by an ad hoc interdepartmental group under the chairmanship of the Cabinet Office, with the support of a Department for Education and Employment chaired working group. The remit of the audit was to examine the UK's performance at the level of basic qualifications for employment and to compare it with those of our leading competitors. It will be published in the summer in parallel with the third competitiveness White Paper.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Colliery Tips

Mr. Batiste: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what estimate he has made of the value of the colliery tips still held by British Coal; and what receipts to public funds he estimates will accrue from their disposal in *(a)* the current and *(b)* the next financial year. [28857]

Mr. Page: The valuation of British Coal's property, including colliery tips, and the likely proceeds from their disposal is a commercial matter for the corporation.

Mr. Batiste: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if British Coal is subject to the scrutiny of the Comptroller and Auditor-General in the disposal of its surplus colliery tips. [28855]

Mr. Page: The Comptroller and Auditor-General is not the external auditor of British Coal and has no statutory right of access to its records. He can, of course, look at the Department's activities in relation to its sponsorship of British Coal.

Mr. Batiste: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) what mechanisms exists to ensure that British Coal obtains value for money in its disposal of colliery tips; [28853]

(2) what guidelines he issues to British Coal in respect of obtaining the best price for disposals of colliery tips. [28854]

Mr. Page: The disposal of its non-operational property, including colliery tips, is a matter for British Coal. However, British Coal must comply with its statutory duties under section 11 of the Coal Industry Act 1994.

Advanced Gas-cooled Reactors

Mr. Battle: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what liability for (i) the management of spent fuel following AGR station closure, and for reprocessing of the final core, (ii) stage 1 AGR decommissioning payments, (iii) the decommissioning of British Nuclear Fuels plc, AGR-related facilities and (iv) the management and disposal of intermediate and high level AGR wastes will fall upon *(a)* the British Energy segregated fund and *(b)* other bodies; and if in each case he will list those bodies. [29229]

Mr. Eggar: British Energy will be responsible for all the fuel cycle and decommissioning liabilities associated with its nuclear power stations. The segregated fund will cover all the longer term post-closure costs of decommissioning British Energy's nuclear power stations and their sites, in accordance with decommissioning strategies agreed between the company and the regulator, the Health and Safety Executive's nuclear installations inspectorate. It will, therefore, include the post-closure costs related to the care and maintenance and ultimate

decommissioning of any on-site long-term spent fuel storage facilities if they become part of a future agreed strategy.

General Utilities and Mid Kent Holdings plc

Mr. Brazier: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what waiver he has given to General Utilities in respect of its undertaking of 21 March 1991 in respect of Mid Kent Holdings plc; and if he will make a statement. [28975]

Mr. John M. Taylor: No waiver has been given to General Utilities. The company remains bound by the undertakings given on 21 March 1991.

Company Auditors

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he has received the fourth annual reports on the recognised supervisory bodies for company auditors under part II of the Companies Act 1989; and if he will make a statement. [29631]

Mr. Oppenheim: I have received the fourth annual reports of all the recognised supervisory bodies for company auditors, and have placed copies in the Library of the House. My Department will be discussing the contents of the reports with the bodies as necessary.

Company Directors

Mr. Fatchett: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will list the number of individuals disqualified from acting as company directors in each of the last 10 years. [29015]

Mr. Oppenheim: As this is a day-to-day matter dealt with by Companies House executive agency, I have asked the chief executive to reply to the hon. Gentleman in person.

Letter from John S. Holden to Mr. Derek Fatchett, dated 14 May 1996:

You recently asked the President of the Board of Trade for information about disqualified directors. As Companies House Executive Agency has the responsibility for maintaining these statistics, I have been asked to reply to you.

The figures for disqualification orders notified to Companies House between 1986 and 31 March 1995 are given below. These have been taken from our Annual Report for 1994/95. The current number of directors on the disqualification register is 2,574 However, you will need to be aware that not all orders are notified by the courts to Companies House.

Period	*Total*
1986	124
1986–87	112
1987–88	197
1988–89	332
1989–90	318
1990–91	289
1991–92	289
1992–93	497
1993–94	374
1994–95	493

If you need further information please do not hesitate to contact me.

Company Collapses

Mr. Sutcliffe: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will investigate the circumstances leading to Homepower Retail Ltd. and Power Store Trading Ltd. reducing a £7 million trade surplus and going into administration. [29260]

Mr. Oppenheim: If the hon. Member or any other person has any information which suggests that there has been any fraud or misconduct in connection with the affairs of the companies, he should send it to my investigations and enforcement directorate at room 707, 10 Victoria street, London SW1H ONN.

The Secretary of State will await the report on the conduct of the directors which is due to be made under the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986 within six months of the appointment of the administrators.

Mr. Sutcliffe: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what action he intends to take to assist Homepower retail customers who have paid for goods which they have not received. [29259]

Mr. Oppenheim: The administrators have identified a number of customers who have paid all or part of the cost of goods which have yet to be supplied. I am advised that on 1 May 1996 Mr. Duggins, one of the joint administrators, wrote to each of these customers advising them of the various actions they could take and asking them to complete a claim form. Prior to the appointment of administrators, the directors set up trust accounts with a view to protecting customers against loss of payments made for undelivered goods. The administrators are investigating the position and there is a possibility that customers may eventually recover some or all of their money from this source.

If any such customers have not yet heard from the administrators it is suggested that they contact Mr. Duggins at Arthur Andersen, 1 Victoria square, Birmingham B1 1BD, telephone 0121 233 2101.

Business Grants

Mrs. Roche: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will list the grants and loans provided by his Department to businesses together with the criteria they have to fulfil. [28183]

Mr. Richard Page *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* Grants are available directly to eligible businesses under the following schemes and programmes.

British National Space Centre: Applications Technology Support Programme

British National Space Centre: Earth Observation Programme

British National Space Centre: Space Telecommunications Programme

Carrier Technology Programme

Civil Aircraft Research and Demonstration Programme

Clean Coal Technology Programme

Environmental Technology Best Practice Programme

EUREKA (Collaborative Technology Projects)

Export Marketing Research Scheme

Information Society Initiative

Innovative Manufacturing Initiative

Launch Aid

LEXAS (Languages in Export Advisory Scheme)

LINK

North America Now: Strategic Alliance Service

OSSCAR (Offshore Supplies and Service Company Assistance for Research)

Outward Missions Scheme

Overseas Project Fund

Overseas Science and Technology Expert Mission Scheme (OSTEMS)

Overseas Trade Services: Hands on Training Scheme (HOTS)

Regional Selective Assistance

Renewable Energy Programmes

Shipbuilding Intervention Fund

SMART (Small Firms Merit Award for Research and Technology)

SPUR and SPUR+ (Support for Products Under Research)

Trade Fairs Support Scheme

My Department does not normally give loans, although it guarantees loans under the small firms loan guarantee scheme and the home shipbuilding credit guarantee scheme. My Department also gives financial assistance to businesses in forms other than grants or loan guarantees under various schemes and programmes.

Details of eligibility criteria for the schemes or programmes listed can be obtained by applicants direct from my Department.

British Telecom

Mr. Lewis: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what representations he has received regarding engaged call charging by British Telecom; and if he will make a statement. [28452]

Mr. Lang *[holding answer 9 May 1996]:* I and the Director General of Telecommunications have received a number of representations regarding engaged call charging by British Telecom. The director general has given this matter careful consideration, and concluded that claims that BT is charging for engaged calls are unfounded.

Post Codes

Mrs. Roche: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) what guidance his Department offers to the Post Office regarding the need to avoid disadvantaging businesses when making changes to postal codes; [28739]

(2) what guidance his Department offers to the Post Office regarding the need for consultation of businesses when planning changes to postal codes; [28740]

(3) what action he has taken to ensure that changes to postal codes do not disadvantage small firms. [28741]

(4) what plans he has to ensure that changes to postal codes do not disadvantage small firms. [28742]

Mr. Phillip Oppenheim *[holding answers 13 May 1996]:* Changes to postcodes are an operational matter for the Post Office, which follows consultation procedures agreed with the Post Office Users National Council. Royal Mail is committed to a policy of no change to post codes unless it becomes operationally necessary to do so. To minimise disruption to all customers, Royal Mail has a code of practice which must be followed whenever a post code is to be changed.

Hong Kong Businesses

Mr. Byers: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans he has to introduce measures to assist businesses and their owners presently operating in Hong Kong. [28945]

Mr. Phillip Oppenheim *[holding answer 13 May 1996]:* The Hong Kong Government have full responsibility for the management and regulation of the economy and business environment in Hong Kong. The future Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government will assume this responsibility when Hong Kong reverts to China in 1997. However, the British Government provide support for British businesses in Hong Kong through the office of the British Trade Commission. After 30 June 1997, this role will be per formed by the British Consulate-General in Hong Kong.

Wind Farms

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) what is the current total output of wind farms in the United Kingdom; [29174]

(2) if he will list the wind farms in each part of the United Kingdom. [29173]

Mr. Page *[holding answers 13 May 1996]:* As at 31 March 1996, 31 wind, farms consisting of three or more wind turbines, were operating in the United Kingdom. These wind farms are listed as follows:

England and Wales

Deli, Nr. Delabole, Cornwall

Goonhilly Downs, Cury, Cornwall

Carland Cross Wind Farm, Mitchell, Cornwall

St Breock, St Breock Downs, Cornwall

Four Burrows, Blackwater, Cornwall

Cold Northcott Windfarm, Launceston, Cornwall

Kirkby Moor, Nr Ulverston, Cumbria

Orton Airport, Wiggonby, Cumbria

Haverigg Airfield, Millom, Cumbria

Caton Moor, Lancaster, Lancs

Blood Hill, Winterton-on-Sea, Norfolk

Blyth Harbour, Blyth, Northumberland

Royd Moor Farm, Thurlstone, S. Yorks

Chelker. Skipton Road, W. Yorks

Thornton (Ovendon Moor), Oxenhope, W. Yorks

Coal Clough Farm, Cornholme, W. Yorks

Rhyd-y-Groes 1 and 2, Rhosgoch, Anglesey

Llangwyryfon Windfarm, Llangwyryfon, Dyfed

Dyffryn-Brodyn, Blaenwaun, Dyfed

Taff-Ely Wind Farm, Gilfach Goch, Mid-Glamorgan

Mydydd Cemmaes, Cwith-Lliniad, Powys

Penrhyddlan Windfarm, Llandinam, Powys

Llidiartywaun Windfarm, Llandinam, Powys

Marcheini Wind Farm (Bryntitli), Rhayader, Powys

Northern Ireland

Corkey Wind Farm, Co. Antrim

Elliot's Hill, Co. Antrim

Slieve Rushen Phase 1, Co. Fermanagh

Rigged Hill, Co. Londonderry

Bessey Bell, Co. Tyrone

Scotland

Hagshaw Hill S10, Lanarkshire

Hagshaw Hill S15, Lanarkshire.

I estimate the total output from these windfarms to date to be approximately 1000 GWh, with approximately 40 per cent. of this having been generated during the last 12 months.

HEALTH

GP Fundholders (Doncaster)

13. **Mr. Kevin Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his estimate of the amount of underspend in the budget of GP fundholders in Doncaster for 1995–96. [27993]

Mr. Malone: The information will not be available until the accounts have been audited.

Nationally, general practitioner fundholders have consistently achieved efficiency savings of between 3 and 4 per cent. of budgets set.

Waiting Times

14. **Mr. Mark Robinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made in reducing the time patients have to wait for hospital and out-patient treatment. [27994]

Mr. Horam: Excellent progress has been made in reducing waiting times for all aspects of national health service treatment. At 31 March 1996 fewer than 4,400 patients had been waiting more than a year for inpatient or day case treatment. This is a significant improvement on the position only a year ago when there were more than 32,000 12-month waiters. Also for the first time no 18-month in-patient waits have been reported. For out-patients the latest available figures show that 97 per cent. of patients were seen within 26 weeks of referral and 83 per cent. seen within 13 weeks.

27. **Mr. Janner:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the current normal waiting time for a specialist consultation for a non-urgent illness. [28007]

Mr. Horam: Waiting times for out-patient appointments vary between trusts and between specialties.

The patients charter requires that all patients should be seen for their first out-patient appointment with a consultant within 26 weeks of a written referral from a general practitioner, with nine out of 10 seen within 13 weeks.

Of the 1,904,000 patients seen during the quarter ended 31 December 1995, 83 per cent. waited under 13 weeks and 97 per cent. under 26 weeks.

South Essex Health Authority

15. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health by what percentage the funds provided to the Southend health authority have increased this year; and what is the relative national increase. [27995]

Mr. Horam: In 1996–97 South Essex health authority, which includes Southend has received a cash increase of 7.1 per cent. for hospital and community health services, which compares very favourably with the national increase of 3.9 per cent.

Community Psychiatric Nurses

16. **Mr. Timms:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent assessment he has made of the supply of community psychiatric nurses. [27996]

Mr. Horam: Work force planning and decisions about the demand and supply of qualified nursing staff are most effectively taken by local employers.

The whole-time equivalent number of nurses working in this area rose from 1,880 in 1984 to 4,760 in 1994.

Care in the Community

17. **Mr. Matthew Banks:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures he is taking to reform the care in the community programme. [27997]

Mr. Bowis: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State published the Government's proposals for helping people to make better provision for their long-term care needs on 7 May.

NHS Trusts (Board Members)

18. **Dr. Wright:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what information he collates on the outside interests of board members of NHS trusts. [27998]

Mr. Malone: None. It is the responsibility of the board of each national health service trust to ensure that information on any relevant private interests of members is collected and maintained in a register of interests, which is available for inspection by the public.

GP Fundholding

19. **Mr. Booth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to extend GP fundholding. [27999]

Mr. Malone: Fundholding continues to grow every year. This year has seen a record number of general practitioners entering fundholding, and more are applying to join from next April.

29. **Mr. Hanson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of general practitioners are fundholders. [28009]

Mr. Malone: This year has seen a record number of general practitioners entering fundholding. Since 1 April approximately 51 per cent. of GPs are fundholders, serving 52 per cent. of the population.

London Initiative Zone Scheme

20. **Mr. Evennett:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many projects have been funded through the London initiative zone scheme; and if he will make a statement. [28000]

Mr. Malone: The London initiative zone scheme is a five-year programme which is not yet complete. At its start in 1993–94, nearly 1,000 projects were included in LIZ health authorities' plans to develop primary care services in the capital.

East Lancashire Health Authority

21. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to ensure that NHS patients within the East Lancashire health authority area who are registered with doctors in an adjacent health area are not transferred to another doctor against their wishes. [28001]

Mr. Malone: None. General practitioners have the right, subject to certain safeguards, to remove patients from their lists without giving a reason. Similarly, patients have the right to withdraw from a doctor's list without giving reasons. In order to ensure that no patient is unable to register with a doctor, GPs are required to agree with their health authority the geographical area within which they are willing to accept patients. It is sometimes necessary, for example due to a sudden influx of patients onto their list, for GPs to re-define their practice area. Any patient who is registered with a GP but lives outside the GP's geographical area, and who is then removed from that GP's list, can expect the local health authority to find them another GP within two working days. The national health service now achieves this standard fully.

Dental Services

22. **Mr. Roy Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent assessment he has made of NHS dental provision; and what new initiatives he is taking to provide such facilities in areas at present without such a service. [28002]

Mr. Malone: We regularly monitor the provision of national health service dental services across England. Our record bears out the Government's commitment to NHS dentistry:

- At 31 December 1995 there were 15,942 NHS dentists on the lists of health authorities in England, the highest December figure ever. This is 516 more dentists than at 30 June 1992 and 3,796 more dentists than at 30 September 1979.
- At 29 February there were 26.4 million patients registered in England. This is broadly in line with the position at 30 June 1992, given operational and seasonal factors.
- In 1994–95 gross expenditure on general dental services in England was £1,279 million, an increase in real terms of nearly 60 per cent. since 1978–79.
- In 1994–95 there were 3.7 million more adult dental examinations in England compared with 1979.

Health authorities can advise patients about where to obtain NHS dental services and are able to use various measures, such as employing salaried dentists to ensure adequate availability of NHS dental services. We keep such measures under review so that they remain appropriate to current circumstances. We are also discussing with the dental profession a range of issues aimed to reform dental services. In the longer term we aim to put in place a purchaser/provider system which will be sensitive to local needs.

Private Finance Initiative

23. **Sir Fergus Montgomery:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much has been raised for the NHS through the private finance initiative. [28003]

Mr. Horam: An estimated £50 million of capital funding was made available by the private sector in 1995–96 for private finance initiative schemes in the national health service.

District General Hospital, Dartford

24. **Mr. Dunn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will report progress on the proposed district general hospital in Dartford. [28004]

Mr. Horam: Dartford and Gravesham NHS trust has now shortlisted two consortia, and expects by August to be in a position to seek formal approval to award the contract for the proposed hospital.

Inadequate Housing (Effect on Health)

25. **Mr. Miller:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to address the health needs of people living in inadequate housing. [28005]

Mr. Horam: Health may be affected by a number of factors, and it is difficult to quantify the effects of any one of them. It is for clinicians to treat patients to the best of their ability, whatever the cause of their illness.

Cheviot and Wansbeck NHS Trust

26. **Mr. Jack Thompson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions his Department has had with the Cheviot and Wansbeck NHS trust regarding the funding of its phase II development; and if he will make a statement. [28006]

Mr. Horam: The outline business case of the phase II development at Cheviot and Wansbeck NHS trust was approved by the National Health Service Executive in January 1996, following appraisal and meetings with the trust. The scheme is now being tested under the private finance initiative.

NHS Building Projects

28. **Sir Sydney Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will report progress on the number of major NHS building projects *(a)* presently under construction and *(b)* planned to start imminently. [28008]

Mr. Horam: There are currently 71 major national health service building projects under construction. Information about schemes planned to start imminently is not collected centrally.

Paediatric Intensive Care Beds

30. **Mrs. Helen Jackson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he had made of the current availability of paediatric intensive care beds. [28010]

Mr. Horam: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has asked the chief executive of the National Health Service Executive to report to him on the development of paediatric intensive care. This report will be published shortly.

Operating Theatres (Dress)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will bring in regulations to require non-medically qualified persons viewing surgical operations *(a)* to conform with standard requirements concerning appropriate dress and *(b)* to be free of (i) jewellery (ii) make-up and (iii) other accessories. [28468]

Mr. Horam: It is for each national health service trust to ensure that it has effective local protocols, based on appropriate professional advice, for determining and maintaining safe and appropriate levels of cleanliness in operating theatres.

Asbestos (Cancer of the Larynx)

Mr. Ian McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research has been commissioned by his Department into links between the use of asbestos and cancer of the larynx. [28859]

Mr. Malone: None.

Suicide

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into the relationship between individual anti-depressant drugs and suicide deaths; and if he will make a statement. [28692]

Mr. Bowis: We commissioned and evaluated an effectiveness bulletin, "The Treatment of Depression in Primary Care", which includes reference to 1990 data on death rates by poisoning from anti-depressant drugs. Copies of the bulletin are available in the Library.

Brain Search Facilities

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the *(a)* centres and *(b)* hospitals which provide minute brain search facilities; and if he will make a statement. [28633]

Mr. Horam: In England, national health service trusts with acute hospital facilities have access to neurological and neurosurgical services, which would include facilities for undertaking investigations of the brain.

Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many cases of CJD have been identified in the United Kingdom in each of the past five years analysed by the age group of the sufferer; and if he will indicate in each case his Department's assessment of whether a genetic component contributed to the condition. [28591]

Mr. Horam: I refer the hon. Member to the reply that I gave the hon. member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) on 1 April at column *46*. The national Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease surveillance unit carries out genetic investigations on cases of CJD referred to it. Approximately 10 per cent. of cases occur in clusters in families with an inherited genetic disposition.

Doctors

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Sectary of State for Health how many *(a)* junior doctors, *(b)* middle range doctors and *(c)* consultants were employed in each health authority or family health service authority at 30 December for each of the last 20 years. [29203]

Mr. Malone: Information on the number of doctors by grade is contained in standard tables on hospital medical staff for England and Wales which are available in the Library. These provide a breakdown by regional health authority for the years 1982–94 inclusive. Information by district and for years prior to 1982 is not available.

Mr. Milburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 9 January, *Official Report*, column *75*, if he will update the figures on vacant doctor posts. [29469]

Mr. Malone: More recent information is not yet available.

Osteosarcoma

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many cases of osteosarcoma have been diagnosed in each of the district health authorities in the Northern and Yorkshire region since 1985. [29140]

Mr. Horam: This information is not available centrally.

Long-term Care

Mr. Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what estimate he has made of the cost of exempting from contributions to long-term care the value of an individual's home; [29152]

(2) what estimate he has made of the cost of exempting from contributions to long-term care the value of an individual's home up to a limit of £300,000. [29151]

Mr. Bowis: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply that I gave my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. Macgregor) on 4 March at columns *82-83*.

Mr. Denham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the total public cost of introducing a partnership scheme for long-term care in which the average value insurance claimable is £30,000, under *(a)* the option set out in paragraph 9.6 of the consultation document, "A New Partnership for Care in Old Age", and *(b)* the option set out in paragraph 9.7, where the number of policies purchased is (i) 10,000, (ii) 100,000 and (iii) 1,000,000; and in each case over what period of time he forecasts that the expenditure would fall. [29265]

Mr. Bowis: The cost of the scheme would depend on a number of factors, including the level of protection from means testing earned by indemnity insurance and immediate needs annuities, the number of people with partnership products who need residential care and their asset holdings.

Consultants

Mr. Milburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many vacancies there are for consultants in each NHS trust. [29468]

Mr. Malone: Information on consultant vacancies in each national health service trust is not available.

Medical Locums

Mr. Milburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 28 November 1995, *Official Report*, column *614*, if he will provide the figures for medical locums for 1995. [29472]

Mr. Malone: Figures from the medical and dental work force census relating to 30 September 1995 are not yet available.

NHS Trusts

Mr. Milburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will itemise for each trust, by region, the level of retained surplus or deficit in 1994–95 and 1995–96. [29397]

Mr. Horam: I refer the hon. Member to the reply that I gave him on 5 December 1995 at column *193*. Information for 1995–96 will be available in December, following the publication of the national health service trust annual accounts.

Mr. Milburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what have been the costs associated with the establishment of trusts in each region in each year since 1990–91, including conveyancing costs. [29398]

Mr. Malone: I refer the hon. Member to the reply that I gave to the right hon. Member for Derby, South (Mrs. Beckett) on 5 May 1995 at column *323*.

NHS Performance

Mr. Harry Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the spending on the NHS in May 1979; how many patients were treated in the year to May 1979; and what were the equivalent figures for the last available periods. [28290]

Mr. Horam: The information is not available in the form requested. National health service total gross expenditure in England in the financial year 1979–80 was £7,755 million, compared with £31,983 million in 1994–95.

On a comparative basis that is, after converting the 1979 discharge and deaths figure to finished consultant episodes—there were 6.6 million FCEs in all hospital specialties in England in the calendar year 1979 compared with 10.5 million FCEs in 1994–95.

Hypothermia

Mr. Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* incidents and *(b)* fatal incidents of hypothermia have occurred over the last five years in (i) London, (ii) Manchester, (iii) Cardiff, (iv) Newcastle, (v) Leicester, (vi) Derby, (vii) Nottingham, (viii) Norwich, (ix) Birmingham, (x) Plymouth, (xi) Edinburgh, (xii) Aberdeen and (xiii) Brighton. [28422]

Mr. Bowis: The information is not available in the form requested. Incidents of hypothermia in Wales and Scotland are matters for my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Wales and for Scotland. The available information is shown in the tables.

The number of finished consultant episodes in England where the main diagnosis is hypothermia, ICD code 991.6, ordinary and day case admissions to hospital

Borough of residence	*1990–91*	*1991–92*	*1992–93*	*1993–94*
London inner and outer	127	107	97	133
Manchester	47	36	36	35
Newcastle	6	6	10	13
Leicester	6	4	3	3
Derby	3	1	3	2
Nottingham	9	7	8	3
Birmingham	31	50	27	27
Plymouth	10	7	3	0
Brighton	7	10	5	7

Source:
"Hospital Episodes Statistics".

Deaths from hypothermia in various towns and cities in England, Wales and Scotland (ICD codes E991.6 for England and Wales and E901, 778.3 (underlying cause of death), and E901, 778.3, 780.8, 780.9 (secondary cause) for Scotland

	1990	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*
London	60	87	58	97	81
Manchester	0	2	3	3	2
Cardiff	0	2	0	2	1
Newcastle	1	0	1	5	6
Leicester	0	1	1	0	0
Derby	2	1	0	0	2
Nottingham	1	0	1	0	0
Norwich	0	1	0	1	1
Birmingham	5	12	5	8	5
Plymouth	3	1	2	1	0
Brighton	0	1	1	1	2
Edinburgh	21	15	14	13	19
Aberdeen	3	2	4	3	5

Source:
Office for National Statistics.

Diet and Behaviour (Children)

Mr. Byers: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to investigate possible links between diet and disruptive behaviour and learning difficulties in children. [28933]

Mr. Horam: The Department's advisory committee—the Committee on the Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment—will be reviewing the issue of adverse reactions to food and food additives this year. The review will include assessing whether there is any firm evidence that food may affect behaviour in children.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Beef Ban (Job Losses)

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the estimated loss of jobs following the ban on Northern Ireland beef by the European Union. [28457]

Mr. Ancram: The Department of Economic Development has received notifications of 142 proposed redundancies, of which 48 have taken place. All notifications relate to the red meat sector. It is estimated that some 1,500 people have been laid off due to the bovine spongiform encephalopathy crisis.

Figures for job losses directly attributable to the export ban are not available, and a number of those affected are self-employed.

Inward Investment

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the locations of the inward investment projects promoted by the Industrial Development Board between 1 April 1995 to 31 March 1996 indicating the financial amounts in respect of each project. [29016]

Mr. Ancram: The new inward investment projects negotiated during 1995–96 by the Industrial Development Board were as follows:

Company name	*Location*	*Assistance offered £ million*
Fruit of the Loom Manufacturing Co. Ltd.	Londonderry	2.72
BCO Technologies (NI) Ltd.	Belfast	7.3
Montupet (UK) Ltd.	Lisburn	57
Stream International (NI) Ltd.	Londonderry	5.3
Plastofilm Ltd.	Enniskillen	0.948
Burnside Engineering	Enniskillen	1.033
Aldiscon (NI) Ltd.	Belfast	0.678
Duromould Ltd.	Londonderry	0.223
Europa Tool Co. Ltd.	Belfast	3.2
Seagate Technology (Ireland)	Londonderry	10.4
Scansoft (NI) Ltd.	Moira	Non-selective financial assistance

WALES

Cormorants and Saw-billed Ducks

Sir Cranley Onslow: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many applications for a licence to shoot cormorants and saw-billed ducks were received by his Department in the year 1995–96; how many of these were refused; how many birds were licensed to be shot; and how many have been reported as having been shot. [28294]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: Between 1 April 1995 and 31 March 1996, 15 applications for licences to shoot cormorants and goosanders were received. Two were refused. The 13 licenses issued permitted a maximum number of 37 cormorants and 38 goosanders to be shot as an aid to scaring. Reports on the number of birds shot are still to be fully completed.

Beef Producers

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what measures he proposes to assist the producers of mature beef; and if he will make a statement. [28405]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food said in his statement on 16 April, *Official Report*, columns 513–29, that arrangements were needed to allow back on the market meat from those breeds which often do not mature until after 30 months. Comments have now been invited from interested organisations on proposals to establish a voluntary mature beef assurance scheme. Under these proposals, those specialist beef herds where no cases of BSE have occurred would be able to sell cattle over 30 months for human consumption purposes. It is intended that they would exempt from the restriction in the Beef (Emergency Control) Order 1996.

Part-time Employment

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what changes have taken place since 1980 as a percentage of the working population in *(a)* males and *(b)* females who have part-time jobs; and if he will make a statement. [28407]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: Data on the total number of part-time jobs in Wales in 1980 is not available. Information for 1981 and 1995 is shown in the following table:

Employees in employment, part-time: Wales

	September 1981	*September 1995*	*Change*	*Change as percentage of 1981 working population*[1]
Males	26,100	52,200	+26,100	3
Females	158,400	230,500	+72,100	16

[1] Working population comprises of employees in employment, claimant unemployed, self-employed, armed forces and participants on work-related schemes.

Source:
ONS.

Housing (Elderly People)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many houses were built specifically for the elderly by local authorities and housing associations in Wales in *(a)* 1987, *(b)* 1991, *(c)* 1993 and *(d)* 1995; and if he will make a statement. [28641]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The information requested is as follows:

Number of dwellings

	1987	*1991*	*1993*	*1995*
Local authority	438	131	72	41
Housing association[1]	[2]509	[2]1,149	655	148

[1] These figures are estimates provided by Housing for Wales, which may differ from the estimates returned by local authorities on housing associations, published elsewhere.

[2] Data relates to financial years ending 31 March after year shown: information not available for calender years.

Source:
Local authority returns Housing for Wales.

M4 (Accidents)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many *(a)* deaths, *(b)* injuries and *(c)* accidents have occurred on the M4 in Wales since 1985; and if he will make a statement. [28706]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The information requested is given in the following table. The data refer to personal injury road accidents reported to the police and forwarded to the Welsh Office.

Death, injuries and accidents on the M4 in Wales

Year	Deaths	Injuries	Personal injury accidents
1985	6	199	117
1986	6	204	121
1987	2	176	122
1988	4	221	156
1989	3	245	162
1990	7	341	214
1991	4	272	171
1992	3	259	158
1993	2	224	147
1994	6	263	177
1995	4	319	209
Total	47	2,723	1,754

Public Bodies

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what advice has been issued to his Department by the Commissioner for Public Appointments on the need to identify political activity by persons *(a)* appointed and *(b)* re-appointed to executive non-departmental public bodies; and what guidelines his Department currently follows in this area. [28597]

Mr. Hague: Guidance on new procedures is being prepared which will take full account of the First Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, Cm 2850–1, and the principles and guidance published in April 1996 by the Commissioner for Public Appointments on appointments to executive non-departmental public bodies and NHS bodies. It will take effect by the target date of 1 July 1996.

Council of Agriculture Ministers

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the participation of the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Cardiff, North (Mr. Jones), at the Council of Agricultural Ministers on 29 to 30 April; and what formal representations were made to the council on behalf of Welsh farmers. [28617]

Mr. Hague: As a member of the UK ministerial delegation at Luxembourg, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State participated fully in developing the UK's negotiating position as events unfolded.

Closed Circuit Television

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales which towns in Wales currently have closed circuit television to assist with crime prevention; and if he will make a statement. [28652]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The Government have funded closed circuit television schemes in the following towns in Wales: Aberdare, Barry, Bridgend, Cardiff, Caerphilly, Colwyn Bay, Cwmbran, Haverfordwest, Holyhead, Maesteg, Merthyr Tydfil, Mountain Ash, Neath, Newport, Pontypool, Porthcawl, Rhyl, Swansea, Wrexham and Ystrad Rhondda.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is his Department's policy regarding the further expansion of closed circuit television schemes in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [28698]

Mr. Jones: The Government are convinced that closed circuit television has a crucial part to play in the fight against crime, and will continue to encourage its expansion in Wales.

Independent Schools

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list, by education authority area, the independent schools which have not yet received full recognition, indicating the reasons for this and the action being taken to deal with each school affected. [29288]

Mr. Richards: Independent schools are placed on the provisional register of independent schools in Wales when they are providing full-time education to five or more pupils of statutory school age and when they have provided specified information about the school, such as details about staff, to the Welsh Office. Full registration is considered by the Welsh Office in the light of advice provided by the Office of Her Majesty's chief inspector of schools who visit all provisionally registered schools at least annually. Of the 62 independent schools in Wales, eight are provisionally registered. These are as follows:

School	Local education authority
Bethany Christian School	Neath Port Talbot
Emmanuel Christian School	Caerphilly
Frontline Christian School	Bridgend
Mayflower Christian School	Torfaen
Hendre House	Pembrokeshire
Prospects Centre for Young People	Wrexham
Thaibah Muslim School	Cardiff
Welsh Centre for Conductive Education	Cardiff

The reasons why full registration has not yet been granted varies between the schools but can include concern about the breadth and balance of the curriculum, school structures and organisation or that the school has recently started and needs time to become established. In all cases, where the inspectors have identified shortcomings, the Welsh Office has written to the school concerned asking for these matters to be addressed.

If my right hon. Friend is satisfied that an independent school, whether provisionally or fully registered, is objectionable on certain grounds, including the suitability of the accommodation or instruction, the fitness of staff or the proprietor or concern about the welfare of children, he may issue a notice of complaint seeking remedies to the concerns.

SCOTLAND

Damp Housing

Mr. Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of the number of houses in

Scotland suffering from *(a)* dampness and *(b)* condensation, in (i) the publicly rented, (ii) the privately rented and (iii) the owner-occupied sectors. [27557]

Mr. Michael Forsyth: The available information is set out in the table. It is taken from the 1991 Scottish house condition survey. It should be noted that where a dwelling suffers from both dampness and condensation it is counted in both tables. More up-to-date information will become available when the results of the 1996 Scottish house condition survey are published in the autumn of next year.

Estimated number of dwellings in Scotland with dampness or condensation (by tenure, 1991)

Tenure	*Number (thousands)*
(a) Dwellings with rising or penetrating damp	
Local authority, New Town, other public sector	122
Scottish Homes	6
Privately rented	35
Owner-occupied	100
Housing associations	4
All tenures	267
(b) Dwellings with condensation	
Local authority, New Town, other public sector	202
Scottish Homes	15
Privately rented	33
Owner-occupied	138
Housing associations	4
All tenures	392

Approximately 110 thousand dwellings included in both the above tables had both damp and condensation.

Source:

1991 Scottish House Condition Survey.

Cockenzie Power Station

Mr. Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he has made an assessment of the consequences for the Scottish economy of the closure of Cockenzie power station; and if he will make a statement. [27843]

Mr. Michael Forsyth: The future of Cockenzie power station is a matter for its owner, Scottish Power. I understand that the company currently plans to operate the power station until its working life expires in 2010.

Electricity Prices

Mr. Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is the current level of electricity prices to industrial and commercial customers in Scotland; what it was in 1990; and if he will make a statement. [27842]

Mr. Forsyth: Since privatisation, electricity prices charged to industrial and commercial consumers with an annual consumption of over 100 KW have been a commercial matter for the electricity supply companies and their customers. Smaller industrial and commercial customers who use less than 100 KW are normally charged under published maxium demand tariffs. Such charges have fallen by about 10 per cent. in real terms since 1989–90.

Health Service (Acute Bed Strategy)

Mr. Galbraith: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he expects to publish the review of the acute bed strategy; and if he will make a statement. [28173]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: My right hon. Friend has received the report prepared by the review group. He will make an announcement in due course.

Crofting

Mr. Macdonald: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he next plans to review the level of grant and loan available under the crofter building grant and loan scheme; and if he will make it his policy that no major changes to the structure of the scheme will be introduced without full and lengthy public consultation. [28274]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson: My noble Friend the Minister for Agriculture, Forestry and the Environment, had a number of discussions with crofting interests earlier in the year about a possible shift to a grant-only scheme with increased levels of grant. The views expressed were considered carefully and are reflected in the statement made by my right hon. Friend at the Scottish Grand Committee meeting on Monday 13 May.

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what measures he is taking to provide support to crofters for *(a)* controlling and maintaining bracken, hedges and dykes and *(b)* the provision or improvement of water supplies. [28195]

Mr. Robertson: Assistance for crofters is currently available through a number of schemes. The crofting counties agricultural grants scheme provides grants to crofters towards the costs of controlling and maintaining bracken, hedges and dykes, and the provision or improvement of water supplies. The agricultural business improvement scheme offers grants towards the eradication of bracken to encourage heather regeneration; the provision of dykes to exclude livestock in association with conservation management; and the provision, replacement or improvement of water supplies. The Argyll and Shetland islands environment sensitive area schemes include support for provision of dykes: the Argyll islands scheme also includes support for control of bracken in certain situations.

Mrs. Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what the budget allocation is planned to be for the crofter building grants and loans scheme in each of the next three years. [28198]

Mr. Robertson: The supply estimate provision for 1996–97 is £5.002 million. Ministers will take decisions on the level of provision for future years in the context of the forthcoming public expenditure survey.

Mr. Macdonald: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what were the total payments made under the crofting agricultural grants scheme 1995–96; and if he will publish the representations he has received regarding the proposed ending of the scheme. [28275]

Mr. Robertson: The provisional outturn for payments made in 1995–96 under the crofting counties agricultural grants scheme is £3.181 million. Unless specifically requested otherwise by the consultee, responses to the

consultation on proposals for a Scottish countryside premium scheme are available for public view in the Library in St. Andrew's house, Edinburgh.

Skye Bridge (Explosives)

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement into circumstances surrounding the discovery and subsequent controlled detonation of explosive material in the vicinity of the Skye bridge on 30 April; and what steps he has taken to require a full search of the bridge and its environs to ensure the removal of any other similar items. [28176]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The Scottish Office has recently taken receipt of a report on the incident by the Miller Group safety department following its request for an inquiry. Details of the circumstances of the incident are described in the report. I have therefore arranged to have a copy lodged in the Library.

The report concludes that the condition of the explosive material was such that its potential for causing harm was remote. It further concludes that the blasting sub-contractor had not encountered this problem before. As a consequence, the sub-contractor intends to amend his procedures to eliminate the possibility of such an incident recurring. The report will now be forwarded to the Health and Safety Executive for its attention. Both the sub-contractor and main contractor have carried out a thorough search of the area and have given their assurance that no similar items are present.

Corncrake Initiative

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if the Scottish countryside premium scheme will take the value of the corncrake initiative into account; and if he will make a statement. [28197]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson: The content of the proposed countryside premium scheme has yet to be finalised following the consultation period which ended on 30 April. Our proposals include specific measures to encourage the protection of ground nesting birds, including corncrakes.

Funding for the countryside premium scheme is separate from any support given by Scottish Natural Heritage and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds to their corncrake initiative.

Eaglesham Bypass

Mr. Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has received from East Renfrewshire council concerning the Eaglesham bypass; and what response he has given. [27844]

Mr. Michael Forsyth: To date no representations have been received from East Renfrewshire council on this matter.

Mr. Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has received from the east Renfrewshire council concerning an Eaglesham bypass; and if he will make a statement. [28328]

Mr. Forsyth: No representations have been received from east Renfrewshire council on this matter. Guidance has now been issued to councils about a transport challenge fund which will operate from 1997–98. It is open to the council to submit a bid for challenge funding for the Eaglesham bypass if it wishes to do so.

Mearnskirk Hospital Site

Mr. Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has for the future of the Mearnskirk hospital site in Newton Mearns; and if he will make a statement. [28336]

Mr. Michael Forsyth: Following full public consultation, Greater Glasgow health board will invest an estimated £4 million in a 60-bed elderly continuing care facility on the Mearnskirk hospital site. Surplus land on the site will be used for housing.

The board's plans will match local services to local needs.

Brain Search Facilities

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the *(a)* centres and *(b)* hospitals which provide minute brain search facilities; and if he will make a statement. [28635]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The majority of acute hospitals in Scotland are able to access neurological services. Neurosurgical services are provided at Aberdeen royal infirmary, Western general hospital in Edinburgh, Dundee royal infirmary and the Southern general hospital in Glasgow.

Traffic Flows (A78)

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what traffic flow surveys his Department has carried out on the Ardrossan, Saltcoats and Stevenston stretch of the A78; and if he will publish the results. [28609]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Traffic flow counts have been carried out at several locations on the A78 between Ardrossan and Saltcoats over 10 and 12-hour periods on the dates shown as follows:

Date	*Location*	*Recorded traffic flows*
26 May 1994	200 metres west of Dalry Road, Saltcoats	7260 Eastbound (12 hours)
26 May 1994	As above	7480 Westbound (12 hours)
21 April 1995	Eglinton Road (At Seafield Drive), Ardrossan	4832 Southbound (12 hours)
21 April 1995	As above	4347 Northbound (12 hours)
16 November 1995	Loanhead Road, Ardrossan	5049 Westbound (10 hours)
16 November 1995	As above	5507 Eastbound (10 hours)
25 January 1996	As above	5277 Westbound (10 hours)
25 January 1996	As above	5030 Eastbound (10 hours)
29 February 199	Parkhouse Road (High Tide Bar), Ardrossan	5205 Northbound (10 hours)
29 February 1996	As above	5413 Southbound (10 hours)

There is also a census point on the route within Saltcoats which was last counted on 26 May 1994. The total two-way traffic flow recorded was 17,150 vehicle movements over a 24-hour period of which 7 per cent. were heavy goods vehicles.

In addition to this, my consulting engineers employed to plan the proposed Ardrossan, Saltcoats and Stevenston bypass have undertaken a number of traffic surveys during 1992 and 1993. This information will be contained in the environmental assessment stage 3 report which will be available for inspection by interested parties upon publication of the order.

Peter William Hurtt

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has received regarding the convictions of Peter William Hurtt; on what date such representations were received; and when he expects to reach a decision. [28905]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Representations on Mr. Hurtt's behalf were sent to my right hon. Friend on 22 May 1989, on 1 September 1992, on 4 May 1993 and on 29 August 1994. The three earlier representations have already been dealt with. The most recent representations allege that new scientific evidence has come to light which casts doubt on the safety of Mr. Hurtt's conviction. My right hon. Friend hopes to reach a decision on the latest petition as soon as may be possible.

Traffic Flows (A737)

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what traffic flow surveys his Department has carried out on the volume of traffic flowing along the A737 at its junction with the A738; and if he will publish the results. [28610]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: No traffic surveys have been carried out at this location by the Scottish Office. However, a traffic survey was carried out about 1 mile south-east of this location on 13 June 1994 by the former Strathclyde regional council. The traffic survey produced an annual average daily flow of 10,522, of which 8 per cent. were heavy goods vehicles.

NHS Management

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, pursuant to his answer of 26 March, *Official Report*, column *581*, if he will list those chief executives who were employed by one NHS employer in Scotland and who resigned to take up employment with another NHS employer in Scotland since 1 September 1994; and if he will name in each case the NHS employing organisations they *(a)* left and *(b)* took up employment with. [28604]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Mr. G. Buchanan, who resigned employment with Caithness and Sutherland NHS trust and took up employment with Moray Health Services NHS trust, is the only chief executive to resign employment from one NHS employer in Scotland and become employed by another since 1 September 1994.

Head and Deputy Head Teachers

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many *(a)* staff and *(b)* female staff were employed at (i) head teacher, (ii) assistant head teacher and (iii) deputy head teacher levels for (1) secondary and (2) primary schools for each education authority within Scotland in September 1994. [28613]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson: The information requested is given in the table.

Number (full-time equivalent) of headteachers, assistant headteachers and deputy head-teachers in education authority primary and secondary schools in Scotland at September 1994

	Head teacher		*Deputy head teacher*		*Assistant head teacher*	
	Total	*Female*	*Total*	*Female*	*Total*	*Female*
Secondary schools						
Scotland	394	18	395	47	1,031	250
Borders	9	0	9	1	27	5
Central	17	1	20	1	49	5
Dumfries and Galloway	16	0	16	0	32	4
Fife	19	0	18	4	69	18
Grampian	38	1	37	5	98	24
Highland	26	0	26	1	42	6
Lothian	44	3	44	6	123	30
Strathclyde	167	11	174	22	490	126
Tayside	30	1	30	4	86	28
Orkney	6	0	2	0	5	1
Shetland	8	1	8	1	3	1
Western Isles	14	0	12	2	7	2
Strathclyde Divisions						
Argyll and Bute	10	0	10	1	22	2
Ayr	29	2	27	3	80	12
Dunbarton	23	1	27	4	77	30
Glasgow	40	3	44	5	120	36
Lanark	37	3	36	2	111	26
Renfrew	28	2	30	7	81	20
Scotland	2,256	1,658	708	629	775	706
Borders	73	48	14	14	6	5
Central	113	86	51	46	39	36
Dumfries and Galloway	109	70	24	22	12	8
Fife	144	103	57	55	43	40
Grampian	265	181	80	70	59	52
Highland	193	138	29	27	14	11
Lothian	231	154	131	114	85	77
Strathclyde	864	696	257	226	445	415
Tayside	183	119	62	53	51	43
Orkney	19	15	1	1	1	1
Shetland	27	19	2	1	8	7
Western Isles	34	29	1	1	11	10
Strathclyde Divisions						
Argyll and Bute	71	52	8	7	6	6
Ayr	146	106	45	37	73	67
Dunbarton	114	96	44	40	66	62
Glasgow	222	186	63	60	109	103
Lanark	205	170	45	38	106	97
Renfrew	106	86	52	44	86	81

Hospital and Health Services Contracts

Ms Rachel Squire: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the contracts for hospital and health services awarded under the competitive tendering process

to date by *(a)* Argyll and Clyde, *(b)* Ayrshire and Arran, *(c)* Borders, *(d)* Dumfries and Galloway, *(e)* Fife, *(f)* Forth Valley, *(g)* Grampian, *(h)* Greater Glasgow, *(i)* Highland, (j) Lanarkshire, *(k)* Lothian, *(l)* Orkney, *(m)* Shetland, *(n)* Tayside and *(o)* Western Isles health boards; and if he will indicate the successful tenderers and the value of the contracts. [28618]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Newcastle Upon Tyne, East (Mr. Brown) on 29 March 1995, column *581*, which stated that the information requested had been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Since that date, information subsequently received on contracts awarded is set out as follows.

Contracts Awarded

	Service type	*Contractor*	*Commence date*	*Previous cost £000*	*Tender value £000*
By Health Board					
Highland	Internal audit	Coopers and Lybrand	1 October 1995	38	38
Orkney	Internal audit	Coopers and Lybrand	1 October 1995	18	18
Shetland	Internal audit	Coopers and Lybrand	1 October 1995	18	18
Western Isles	Domestic	In-house	1 January 1996	433	410
	Catering	In-house	1 January 1996	456	433
	Internal audit	Coopers and Lybrand	1 October 1995	30	30
	Laundry	In-house	1 January 1996	119	119
	Laundry	In-house	1 January 1996	74	55
By NHS Trust					
Aberdeen Royal Hospitals	Internal audit	Coopers and Lybrand	1 October 1995	78	78
	Occupational health	RGIT Health Ltd.	1 April 1995	95	[1]160
Caithness and Sutherland	Internal audit	Coopers and Lybrand	1 October 1995	28	28
Dundee Teaching Hospitals	Catering	In-house	1 August 1995	1,337	1,324
Fife Healthcare	Supplies	In-house	1 April 1996	223	221
Glasgow Royal Infirmary	Hotel services	Initial	28 January 1996	774	713
Grampian Healthcare	Internal audit	Coopers and Lybrand	1 October 1995	70	70
Highland Communities	Internal audit	Coopers and Lybrand	1 October 1995	50	50
Moray Health Services	Internal audit	Coopers and Lybrand	1 October 1995	44	44
Raigmore Hospital	Internal audit	Coopers and Lybrand	1 October 1995	43	43

[1] Higher specification of services being provided with the new contract.

Bursaries

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the amount of money *(a)* allocated in the current financial year to each further education college in Scotland for bursaries and *(b)* spent on bursaries for each college by the previous regional councils in 1995–96. [28648]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson: The information is set out in the table.

College	*1996–97 bursary allocation*	*1995–96 local authority expenditure*
Aberdeen	3,416,389	3,362,732
Angus	1,254,211	1,234,513
Anniesland	517,128	509,007
Ayr	1,022,273	1,006,217
Banff and Buchan	1,032,714	1,016,494
Barony	150,002	147,826
Bell	—	—
Borders	1,162,435	1,144,178
Cambuslang	509,326	501,326
Cardonald	1,674,300	1,648,003
Central	522,465	514,259
Clackmannan	630,934	621,025
Clydebank	1,295,143	1,274,802
Coatbridge	862,214	848,672
Cumbernauld	561,627	552,806
Dumfries and Galloway	1,381,549	1,359,851
Dundee	2,335,871	2,299,184
Elmwood	481,628	474,064
Falkirk	1,624,131	1,598,623
Fife	924,418	909,899
GCBP	683,312	672,580
GCFT	659,434	649,077
GCNS	570,988	562,020
Glenrothes	880,220	866,395
Inverness	1,545,448	1,521,176
James Watt	1,605,220	1,580,009
JEVC	995,670	980,032
John Wheatley	368,111	362,329
Kilmarnock	1,578,468	1,553,677
Langside	970,046	954,811
Lauder	1,020,161	1,004,138
Lews Castle	388,848	382,741
Moray	1,423,876	1,401,513
Motherwell	1,833,883	1,805,081
North Glasgow	831,965	818,898
Oatridge	252,429	248,465
Perth	1,305,562	1,285,057
Reid Kerr	1,436,578	1,414,015
Stevenson	1,375,391	1,353,789
Stow	792,189	779,747
Telford	1,974,867	1,943,850
Thurso	449,325	442,268
West Lothian	753,819	741,980
Total	45,054,568	44,347,129

Ambulance Base, Kyleakin

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many representations he received in favour of the proposal to site an ambulance base at Kyleakin, Isle of Skye; and if he will make a statement. [29238]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: None. However, the Scottish Ambulance Service NHS trust aims to make the most efficient and effective use of the resources at its disposal to improve the quality of service to its patients. In view of the changes brought about by the opening of the Skye bridge, the Scottish Ambulance Service has conducted a review and has concluded that the additional costs of establishing an ambulance station in Kyleakin will be justified by improved activation and response times. Highland health board, which is responsible for purchasing appropriate levels of emergency ambulance provision in the area, has supported these proposals.

Mr. Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will hold an inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the decision to site an ambulance base at Kyleakin, Isle of Skye, with specific reference to the prohibition upon serving personnel to discuss the issue with others; and if he will make a statement. [29239]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: No. The deployment of its staff and vehicles and the siting of ambulance stations are operational matters for the Scottish Ambulance Service NHS trust to decide in agreement with the purchasing health board. The staff are fully aware of the proposals and have the opportunity to make any observations on these to senior officers of the service.

Caledonian MacBrayne

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is the subsidy to be paid to Caledonian MacBrayne Ltd. for the financial year commencing 1 April 1996; what it was for the year ended 31 March; how much of the difference in the figures is attributable to the withdrawal of the Kyle of Lochalsh-Kyleakin service; and if he will make a statement. [29240]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Subject to approval of the estimates, the Government propose to make available to Caledonian MacBrayne Ltd. in 1996–97 revenue deficit grant amounting to £11.7 million. The amount of revenue deficit grant made available to Caledonian MacBrayne in 1995–96 was £8.3 million. The increased requirement for revenue deficit grant in 1996–97 reflects a number of factors, including the loss of the revenue contribution from the Kyle of Lochalsh-Kyleakin service and the cost of compliance with additional safety requirements applying to ro-ro ferries. It is not the Government's practice to disclose information about the profit or loss incurred by Caledonian MacBrayne Ltd. in providing ferry services on individual routes.

NHS Consultants

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will provide a breakdown of the number of current vacancies for consultants in each NHS trust in Scotland; and if he will make a statement. [29496]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The information requested is not held centrally.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many doctors were in higher training for consultancy positions in each year since 1990. [29498]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The information requested is shown in the table.

Hospital medical senior registrars in Scotland at 30 September

	Senior registrars
1990	405
1991	403
1992	390
1993	424
1994	467
1995	479

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many vacancies for consultants there currently are in the NHS in Scotland; how many of these posts have been vacant for six months or more; how many vacancies for consultants there have been in each month since 30 September 1995; and if he will make a statement. [29495]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The latest information available centrally shows that at 30 September 1995 there were 201 consultant vacancies in the NHS in Scotland; 72 of these had been vacant for six months or more.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will provide a breakdown, by specialist field, of the current vacancies for consultants in the NHS in Scotland. [29497]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The latest information available centrally is shown in the table.

Consultant vacancies in the NHS in Scotland at 30 September 1995

Accident and Emergency	12
Anaesthetics	29
Laboratory and support specialists	9
Blood transfusion	1
Clinical chemistry	1
Haematology	2
Microbiology	4
Pathology	1
Medical specialists	46
Dermatology	1
General medicine (group)	21
Cardiology	4
Communicable diseases	1
Gastroenterology	4
General medicine	10
Nephrology	1
Respiratory medicine	1
Geriatric medicine	3
Medical paediatrics	14
Neurology	2
Palliative medicine	2
Radiotherapy	1
Rehabilitation medicine	2
Obstetrics and gynaecology	5
Occupational health	1
Psychiatric specialists	46
Child and Adolescent psychiatry	5
Forensic psychiatry	2
General psychiatry	29
Mental handicap	4
Old age psychiatry	6

GREAT BRITAIN HOUSE OF COMMONS
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1995/1996

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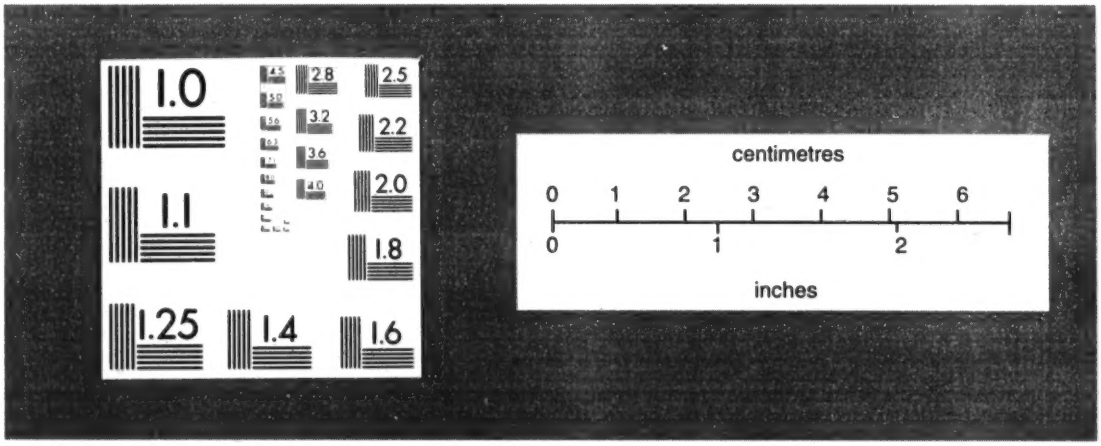

Consultant vacancies in the NHS in Scotland at 30 September 1995

Radiology	6
Diagnostic radiology	6
Surgical specialties	31
ENT surgery	6
General surgery	5
Ophthalmology	5
Orthopaedic surgery	6
Plastic surgery	2
Surgical paediatrics	1
Urology	6
Public health medicine	8
Community Specialties	3
Community child health	2
Family planning	1
Dental specialties	5
Oral surgery	1
Orthodontics	3
Restorative dentistry	1
Total	201

Private Finance Initiative

Ms Janet Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the revenue spending estimated by his Department in connection with the private finance initiative for *(a)* 1995–96, *(b)* 1996–97 and *(c)* 1997–98. [26636]

Mr. Michael Forsyth *[holding answer 2 May 1996]:* The estimated revenue payments which may be met from my expenditure programmes in respect of private finance initiative projects reported to the Scottish Office are, for the three years respectively *(a)* £12 million *(b)* £20 million and *(c)* £51 million.

Office Space

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the square footage and cost of office space rented by his Department and its agencies and the number of his Department or agencies' buildings partly, or fully unoccupied together with the square footage of that unoccupied office space and its estimated rental value where available in each of the past five financial years. [27722]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton *[holding answer 9 May 1996]:* Most of the leased office space occupied by the Scottish Office during the past five financial years formed part of the common user estate which was the responsibility of the Department of the Environment. My right hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service has provided details of rents and vacant space on the common user estate which were held centrally.

Details of payments made to Property Holdings by the Scottish Office in respect of common user estate accommodation, are shown in table 1. Information regarding offices leased directly by the Scottish Office and its agencies is given in table 2. In both cases, figures are readily available only for the last three years and information regarding vacant space during that time could be collected only at disproportionate cost.

Table 1: Scottish Office Common User Estate Offices

Year	*Total number of buildings*	*Rental cost (excl. VAT)*	*Total leased floor area (ft²)*
1995–96	28	4,166,366	423,769
1994–95	33	3,916,859	484,652
1993–94	34	4,878,211	511,578

Table 2: Scottish Office (and Agencies) Offices

Year	*Total number of buildings*	*Rental cost (excluding VAT)*	*Total leased floor area (ft²)*
1995–96	15	182,481	23,697
1994–95	15	173,761	22,434
1993–94	16	180,656	70,547

River Pollution

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, pursuant to the letter of Dr. D. M. Holloway of the Scottish Environment Protection Agency eastern region of 2 April about the River Almond *(a)* what action he is taking to reduce ammonia concentrations elevated to levels toxic to aquatic organisms, *(b)* what action is available to him in respect of the deposition of sewage solids on the bed of the river, *(c)* what help he is giving with the construction of a trunk sewer from the Almond catchment area to Edinburgh and *(d)* if he will bring responsibility for abandoned minewater drainage within the control of SEPA. [27932]

Mr. Kynoch *[holding answer 13 May 1996]:* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has identified the River Almond as a sensitive area under the Urban Waste Water Treatment (Scotland) Regulations 1994. This means that discharges of urban waste water from agglomerations with a population equivalent greater than 10,000 must by 31 December 1998 receive further treatment than either secondary or equivalent treatment in order that directive requirements may be fulfilled in respect of the watercourse. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency has responsibility for the regulation of discharges to controlled waters and will monitor discharges to ensure compliance with the regulations.

The East of Scotland Water Authority, however, intends that discharging into the River Almond should cease and that the proposed River Almond valley trunk sewer should take these discharges direct to Edinburgh sewage treatment works. There should then be a rapid improvement in the biological and chemical quality of the river and, in particular, a reduction in ammonia concentrations and deposition of sewage solids. The authority is at present considering using the private finance initiative to fund this project. The tendering process is likely to commence in June 1996.

Owners or operators of existing abandoned mines have a statutory defence against prosecution for permitting water from an abandoned mine to enter controlled waters. However, the Coal Authority is working closely with the Scottish Environment Protection Agency on developing a programme of projects for the treatment of minewater

discharges. Discharges from mines abandoned after 31 December 1999 will be subject to regulatory control by the agency.

Fishing Safety

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what was the total value of grant aid awarded to Scottish fishermen under the Fishing Vessels (Improvement) (Grants) scheme in each year from 1990 to 1995, and the first quarter of 1996. [29175]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson *[holding answer 13 May 1996]:* Scottish fishing vessels received a total of £4.95 million under the Fishing Vessels (Improvement) (Grants) schemes between 1990–91 and 1995–96. A breakdown of the expenditure per year is given in the table.

Year	*Amount paid (£)*
1990–91	611,988
1991–92	263,290
1992–93	224,951
1993–94	935,580
1994–95	1,478,303
1995–96	1,437,155

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the average length of time taken to process applications for grants awarded in Scotland under the provisions of the Fishing Vessels (Improvement) (Grants) scheme each year from 1990 to 1995. [29154]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson *[holding answer 13 May 1996]:* The Sea Fish Industry Authority administers the Fishing Vessels (Improvement) (Grants) scheme on behalf of the Government. It does not keep detailed historical records of the time taken to deal with individual applications, but I understand that the average time taken to deal with an application, from receipt to formal approval, is estimated as four weeks.

Ravenspark Hospital

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions his Department has had during the last six months with officers of Ayrshire and Arran health board and the Ayrshire and Arran community healthcare NHS trust concerning the closure of Ravenspark hospital. [29005]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton *[holding answer 13 May 1996]:* Scottish Office officials meet regularly with Ayrshire and Arran health board and the Ayrshire and Arran Community Healthcare NHS trust to discuss a wide range of issues. The health board is keeping my Department in touch with developments concerning Ravenspark hospital.

NHS (Private Contracts)

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what contracts NHS trusts and health boards have entered into with private providers during the financial years *(a)* 1994–95 and *(b)* 1995–96; and if he will list the NHS bodies involved, the values of the contracts in each case, the private providers used and the nature of each of the contracts. [29074]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton *[holding answer 13 May 1996]:* Comprehensive information about the extent to which NHS trusts and health boards contract with the private sector is not available centrally.

ENVIRONMENT

Listed Structures (Demolition)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how many listed buildings and other structures have been demolished since 1992. [28716]

Sir Paul Beresford: I refer the hon. Member to the answer that I gave him on 7 February at column *248*, giving figures for the financial years 1993–94 and 1994–5. The corresponding figures for the financial year 1992–93 are:

Grade I: 0

Grade II: 0

Grade II: 68.

The Department is currently compiling figures for 1995–96. I shall write to the hon. Member once they are available.

Opencast Mining

Mr. Mike O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what progress is being made towards finalising the mineral planning guidance note No. 7; what representations he has received from local authorities regarding the restoration of opencast coal sites; and if he will make a statement. [29276]

Sir Paul Beresford: A draft of mineral planning guidance note No. 7 was published for public consultation in December 1995, and comments were requested by 14 February 1996. Responses were received from the local authority associations, three local authorities and the Coalfield Communities Campaign regarding the reclamation of opencast coal sites. Their comments are being carefully considered, alongside all other responses. Revised guidance will be published in due course.

Landlords (Right of Entry)

Mr. Byers: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment in what circumstances landlords have a right of entry to their own property without a court order. [28928]

Mr. Clappison: Landlords have a right of entry to their property where there is specific provision in the tenancy agreement or lease. They also have statutory and common law rights of entry in defined circumstances, for instance when they need to carry out repairs, or to allow them to value their interest in a property which is subject to a statutory claim by leaseholders wishing to enfranchise or acquire a new lease.

Joint Tenancies

Mr. Michael Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when he proposes to issue guidance to local housing authorities on the use of joint tenancies for adults sharing a home on a long-term basis. [29580]

Mr. Curry: I have today published DOE circular 7/96, "Local Authority Joint Tenancies". Copies have been sent to all local housing authorities in England. A parallel circular has been issued in Wales. Copies have been placed in the Library of the House.

Biodiversity Steering Group

Mr. David Shaw: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when he expects to respond to the report of the biodiversity steering group; and if he will make a statement. [29685]

Mr. Gummer: The UK biodiversity steering group was set up to advise the Government on the further development of the UK biodiversity action plan. The Government welcomed the group's report at its launch in December 1995. It will publish its response tomorrow under a foreword from the Prime Minister. The response will be positive and will explain how the Government, in partnership with other sectors will implement the species and habitat action plans and carry forward the other recommendations in the report. In particular it will set out a number of new initiatives it is taking to ensure that the UK maintains its leading role in the implementation of the convention on biological diversity. Copies of the response will be placed in the Library.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 15 May 1996

DEFENCE

Chemical and Biological Defence

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence to what chemical agents service personnel attending the defence nuclear biological and chemical centre at Winterbourne Gunner have been exposed during training courses since 1966; and what was the purpose of such exposure. [28039]

Mr. Soames: Service personnel attending courses at DNBCC have not been subjected to any chemical agents since 1980. Between 1966 and 1980, students at DNBCC were exposed to a small amount of mustard agent, equating to the size of a pinhead, on the inside of their wrists. The aim of these exercises was to prove and give confidence to the chemical agent decontamination process which students would be expected to teach to members of the service in their parent units. The practice stopped on scientific advice from the chemical and biological defence establishment because it was not compatible with emerging health and safety guidelines.

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many service personnel attending the defence nuclear biological and chemical centre at Winterbourne Gunner have taken part at the same time in the service volunteers programme at the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment since 1966. [28040]

Mr. Soames: No service personnel attending courses at the DNBCC at Winterbourne Gunner have participated in the service volunteers programme at CBDE Porton Down since 1988. Prior to that date, a small number of personnel may have volunteered to participate in routine short trials at CBDE, although this was not standard practice. However, while records are maintained of all volunteers attending Porton Down, DNBCC did not maintain a record of its students who may have attended trials at CBDE on an ad hoc basis. In the absence of such records, it is impossible to identify how many, if any, participants on the service volunteers programme were DNBCC students when they volunteered.

Helicopter Flying School

Mr. Spellar: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress on industrial participation for the defence helicopter flying school competition. [29223]

Mr. Soames: Having reviewed our approach to industrial participation on the defence helicopter flying school competition, it has now been decided that IP proposals should be sought in accordance with MOD policy. The three bidders have been informed.

Services Airpower Doctrine

Mr. Spellar: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the services doctrine on airpower was last published. [29325]

Mr. Soames: The most recent edition was published in 1993.

Redundancy Costs

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answers of 14 December 1995, *Official Report*, column *772* and *Official Report*, 21 March 1996, columns *286–87*, how many redundancies there have been in each of the armed services in each financial year since 1992. [29334]

Mr. Soames: The numbers of redundancies in each of the armed services for each financial year since 1992–93 are as follows:

Year	*RN*	*Army*	*RAF*	*Total*
1992–93	400	3,338	219	3,957
1993–94	1,272	6,460	1,310	9,042
1994–95	2,440	7,015	1,639	11,094
1995–96	[1]2,400	87	2,832	5,319

[1] This RN figure covers financial years 1995–96 to 1996–97.

Nuclear Accident Exercise (Otterburn)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the scenario and aims of the nuclear weapon accident exercise due to take place between 20 and 24 May at the Otterburn ranges in Northumbria; if the guidance to civil authorities on action to be taken in the event of a nuclear weapons accident will be tested; if he will list *(a)* the civil authorities due to participate in the exercise and *(b)* the civil and military authorities from the United Kingdom and abroad invited as observers; and what is the cost of mounting the exercise. [29396]

Mr. Soames: Exercise Senator will be based on an accident during the road transportation of nuclear weapons. While the scenario and its consequences are extremely unlikely, it has been designed to fulfil the aim of testing arrangements for a full combined response by the MOD's nuclear accident response organisation and the appropriate civil agencies. It will therefore provide an opportunity to evaluate the MOD guidance which was recently issued under the title "Local Authority and Emergency Service Information on Nuclear Weapon Transport Contingency Plans". A copy of this document is in the Library of the House. There will be a wide range of civil players, including the emergency services and local authorities in the vicinity of Otterburn, and officials from appropriate government departments and other agencies at both regional and national level. Invitations to observe relevant parts of the exercise have been issued by the main participants to appropriate authorities and individuals. The costs attributable to Exercise Senator are not available centrally and this information could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Otterburn Ranges

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will list the training programmes which will be affected by the decision of Northumberland county council to delay infrastructure upgrading at Otterburn ranges; and if he will make a statement; [29159]

(2) what assessment he has made of the effect on Salisbury plain training area of not proceeding with the proposed infrastructure upgrading at Otterburn ranges; and if he will make a statement. [29160]

Mr. Soames: Once developed, Otterburn will be the sole training area in the United Kingdom where multi-launch rocket system regiments can conduct live firing over land as fully integrated units. AS90 can also be fired on Salisbury plain, which is, however, the only training area that can sustain tracked vehicle manoeuvre training and exercises of armoured-mechanised battle groups, and has already reached its training and environmental capacity. Any delay to the development of the Otterburn training area would therefore have a severe impact on the Army's overall training programme, and on the operational efficiency of artillery units equipped with AS90 and MLRS.

TRANSPORT

Railway Station Operators

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make available a list of railway stations giving details of the operator responsible for each one. [29753]

Mr. Watts: Two publications giving this information have today been placed in the Library: the "Index of Britain's Stations" published by the Central Rail Users' Consultative Committee, and "A Guide to Railway Stations and Parliamentary Constituencies", produced by the British Railways Board.

Second Severn Crossing

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what assessment he has made of the effect on the completion date of the approach roads contract to the second Severn crossing in respect of *(a)* opening any lanes on the approach roads and *(b)* opening the whole carriageway on the approach roads of (i) defects in the steel work and (ii) substandard construction materials; and if he will make a statement; [29409]

(2) what consultations he has had with the chief executive of the Highways Agency concerning the investigations by the Avon and Somerset police into the allegations of fraudulent supply of construction materials for the M4 and M5 approach roads to the second Severn crossing. [29386]

Mr. Watts: I have asked the chief executive of the Highways Agency to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Lawrie Haynes to Mr. Rhodri Morgan, dated 15 May 1996:

The Secretary of State for Transport has asked me to reply to your recent questions about substandard materials and defects in steel work on the approach roads to the Second Severn Crossing.

As I said in my letter dated 2 May, defects found during inspections and problems with steel fabrication will have no impact on the opening dates for the M4 approach road.

Traffic Management will ensure that any remedial work required after the official opening will be carried out causing minimum disruption to the public.

The allegations of fraud are a matter for the Police.

Regional Airports

Mr. Alfred Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what recent steps his Department has taken further to liberalise services to Manchester and other regional airports for airlines wishing to serve them; and if he will make a statement on the prospects for further liberalisation. [28663]

Mr. Norris: The United Kingdom already has a large number of bilateral agreements with foreign partners which allow the airlines of both sides access to regional airports in both countries. In most cases it is solely a lack of demand that inhibits the provision of services under these agreements.

Services between the USA and UK regional airports, Stansted and Luton, were liberalised last year. Since then several new services have been introduced by US and UK airlines to regional airports. Over the past 12 months, new regional rights have also been negotiated with Jordan, Mauritius, the Seychelles, the Gulf, Pakistan and South Africa. Additionally, Israel was granted a third ex gratia frequency for El Al to serve Manchester.

The Department of Transport continues to aim to liberalise its air services agreements with other countries, taking into account the interests of consumers, airlines and airports. The effect of new air services to regional airports on the regional economy is also taken into account.

Public Service Vehicle Licences

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what checks are made in respect of the criminal records of applicants for PSV licences. [29180]

Mr. Norris: Public service vehicle operators' licences are not granted unless traffic commissioners are satisfied that the applicant meets the requirements of good repute. The applicant must declare any relevant convictions that he or any of his employees have had in the last five years. In advance of the grant of a licence, the names of all applicants are circulated to the police and local authorities who have a statutory right to make a formal objection to a licence being granted.

Driving Instructors

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many approved driving instructors have been found to be in groups 5 and 6 following assessment by the Driving Standards Agency. [29545]

Mr. Norris: As at the end of March 1996, the figures were:

Grade 5: 12,748

Grade 6: 2,288.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what procedures his Department has in place to monitor the training of large goods vehicle and passenger-carrying vehicle driving instructors. [29537]

Mr. Norris: The Driving Standards Agency is working with representatives in the road haulage and training industries to produce a voluntary register of LGV driving instructors. Matters such as entrance exams and check tests, and how such a register should be administered, are currently being considered. It is hoped to introduce the register in spring 1997.

Road Maintenance

Mrs. Dunwoody: to ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many individuals have been injured as a result of road accidents attributed to *(a)* road surface defects, *(b)* road works, *(c)* defective or obscured road signs and *(d)* defective traffic signals for each of the last 10 years. [29554]

Mr. Norris: The number of casualties involved in injury road accidents where road works were present is shown in the following table:

Number of casualties from injury road accidents where road works were present: GB 1984 1984–1994

		Casualties
	At road works	*All*
1984	526	324,314
1985	564	317,524
1986	641	321,451
1987	665	311,473
1988	628	322,305
1989	635	341,592
1990	708	341,141
1991	628	311,269
1992	541	310,673
1993	599	306,020
1994	585	315,189

The presence of road works does not necessarily indicate that they were the cause of the accident. Information about casualties in accidents attributed to road surface defects, defective or obscured road signs and defective traffic signals is not available.

Airbags

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, pursuant to his answer of 26 March, *Official Report*, column *552*, what research his Department has undertaken into injuries and fatalities occurring as a result of a front passenger seat airbag hitting a child in that seat. [29532]

Mr. Norris: The Department of Transport has not undertaken any research into injuries and fatalities occurring as a result of a front passenger seat airbag hitting a rear facing child restraint.

Passenger Transport Executives

Mr. Gunnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what was the revenue received by British Rail for the use of its facilities for the provision of services provided by *(a)* West Yorkshire PTE and *(b)* South Yorkshire PTE in 1993–94, 1994–95 and 1995–96; and what each of those bodies will pay Railtrack in 1996–97. [26513]

Mr. Watts *[holding answer 2 May 1996]:* The figures, which are set out in the table, represent BR's charges for PTE-secured rail services in PTE passenger transport areas net of ticket receipts. BR deducts the revenue from ticket sales in determining the net charges that BR makes to the PTEs. The 1993–94 figures reflect the accounting treatment applicable for that year, when the PTEs were charged only on a marginal cost basis. The figures for 1994–95 and 1995–96 reflect the full costs of rail support, including access charges and rolling stock leasing charges.

£ million

	1993–94	*1994–95*	*1995–96*
South Yorkshire	5.2	16.8	19.8
West Yorkshire	13.8	43.7	45.7

The relevant train operating companies, rather than the PTEs, are responsible for payments for Railtrack charges arising from rail operations.

TREASURY

Self-employment

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 27 February, *Official Report*, column *508*, what progress has been made on extending the use of the single form; and in what areas it is now available. [29158]

Mr. Jack: Following the pilot of the single form to give the self-employed a single notification point for tax, national insurance contributions and VAT, the use of the form was extended to the whole of the country in April 1996. The form is available from tax, social security and VAT offices. The form is accompanied by a new leaflet which guides people commencing self-employment through the ins and outs of income tax, national insurance and VAT, explaining how to get things right first time. Both leaflet and form have been well received by customers.

Tax Offices

Mr. Key: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is *(a)* the total area of the premises, *(b)* the area of office space and *(c)* the area of office space currently in use at Salisbury tax office. [29086]

Mr. Jack: The areas of the premises, office space and office space currently used by Salisbury tax office are as follows—figures shown are in square metres:

Total area of the premises	*Area of office space*[1]	*Area of office space used by tax office*
2,903	2,903	1,326

[1] Although precise details are not known it would appear that the whole premises are for office use.

Mr. Key: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the rents, fees or charges paid by the Inland Revenue in respect of its occupation of Salisbury tax office; and to whom they are paid. [29084]

Mr. Jack: Details of the amounts paid annually by the Inland Revenue in respect of its occupation of Salisbury tax office are as follows:

	£
Freehold property—assessed rent paid to the property	212,252.63
Advisers to the Civil Estate	
Service charge paid to the Lord Chancellor's Department[1]	75,386.87

[1] Includes contribution in lieu of rates.

Mr. Key: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the rents, fees or charges paid by the Inland Revenue in respect of its occupation of Swindon tax office; and to whom they are paid. [29083]

Mr. Jack: There are two tax districts and a collection office in Swindon. The amounts paid annually by the Inland Revenue in respect of its occupation total £491,687 which includes rent, service charge and a contribution in lieu of rates. It is not possible to provide details of individual recipients and amounts paid to them as this information is commercially confidential.

Mr. Key: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is *(a)* the total area of the premises, *(b)* the area of office space and *(c)* the area of office space currently in use at Swindon tax office. [29085]

Mr. Jack: There are two tax districts and a collection office in Swindon. Details of the areas of the premises, office space and office space currently used by each are as follows—areas shown are in square metres:

Office	*Total area of premises*	*Area of office space*[1]	*Area of office space used by tax office*
Swindon 1	1,431	1,431	980
Swindon 2	1,609	1,609	1,523
Swindon Collection	864	864	624

[1] Although precise details are not known it would appear that the whole premises are for office use.

State Earnings-related Pension Scheme

Mr. Matthew Banks: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the Securities and Investments Board has concluded its examination into the sale of personal pensions to those who would otherwise have remained in SERPS; and if he will make a statement. [29809]

Mrs. Angela Knight: The then Minister of State announced on 25 October 1994 by written parliamentary answer, *Official Report*, column *509–12*, that the Securities and Investments Board would work with the Department of Social Security to investigate whether there has been widespread misselling to people who would otherwise have been contributing to the state earnings-related pension scheme. SIB is today making a statement on the outcome of its research. The results are striking, and I hope will be welcomed as positive evidence of the significant financial benefits personal pensions can bring to those who choose them.

Based on a sample, the research demonstrates that nearly all those who contracted out of SERPS stand to gain—and gain significantly—compared with the pension entitlements they would have had in SERPS. At least 96 per cent., and perhaps as many as 99 per cent., of the personal pension policyholders concerned stand to be better off—in most cases by between about 150 and 300 per cent. of the SERPS entitlement given up. That typically amounts to an extra £550 to £1,000 a year of pension rights in today's prices.

However, not all those who contracted out of SERPS are likely to share in this benefit. The research pinpointed a small minority who are likely to be worse off as a result. They may number as few as 1 per cent. of those who chose a personal pension instead of SERPS, and no more than 4 per cent. Where losses occur, they are likely to be very low—typically between £33 and £78 a year in reduced pension rights.

Of those likely to lose, most fall into the category of people with very small personal pension funds: for example, where contributions to the personal pension have ceased because the policy in question has been closed. Often the losses are associated with flat-rate charges by the pension provider, which can erode the value of the pension over time. That does not mean that everyone in this situation is bound to lose. If, for example, the pension policy is later revived, the losses may be wiped out. Those who have policies with providers who waive fixed charges in years where no money is received may not lose out at all.

In view of this, SIB has been exploring with pension providers what scope there is to help people in risk categories through altering charging structures or otherwise. I am pleased to say that action already planned by some firms should help to protect the position of vulnerable policyholders. This is a welcome step in demonstrating the good will of the industry. I challenge all firms to follow their good example.

The research published today makes it clear that a review of the kind currently being carried out for pension transfers and opt-outs would be out of all proportion to the scale of the potential losses. The scale and extent of the potential losses for those who contracted out of SERPS is in stark contrast to the evidence in relation to personal pension holders who had left occupational pension schemes. In the latter case, there was evidence of widespread misselling and loss. There is no such evidence in the case of those who contracted out of SERPS.

However, that does not leave those who may stand to lose without the means to improve their situation. Action is being taken to ensure proper information is available to all those who may be affected. SIB will produce a leaflet for policyholders in the autumn so that they are able to reach an informed view of their own position and on the courses of action that are open to them. Anyone who believes they are the victim of misselling has the option of making a complaint under the normal arrangements established by the Financial Services Act regulators.

This FSA protection, and the additional action that is planned, will ensure that ample help is available to all those who stand to lose from choosing a personal pension instead of SERPS to understand and address their situation.

SIB has acted with commendable thoroughness and diligence in pursuing its research, which places beyond doubt the very great success of the policy of giving people the option to leave SERPS, and demonstrates the very significant advantages of personal pensions for many people.

Government Deficit

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if it is his policy to have the UK general Government financial deficit in 1997–98 at below the reference value used in the European Union's excessive deficits procedure; and if he will make a statement. [28891]

Mr. Waldegrave *[holding answer 10 May 1996]:* The Government's fiscal objective is to bring the public sector borrowing requirement back towards balance over the medium term. The Budget projection of the general Government financial deficit in 1997–98 was £17 billion, equivalent to 2 per cent. of GDP. An updated forecast will be published in the summer economic forecast on 9 July.

Inland Revenue (Interest Charges)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what regulations permit the Inland Revenue to impose interest charges on money requested from taxpayers in respect of time taken by the Inland Revenue to respond to queries about the calculation of the assessment; if he will make it his policy to review the effect of this practice on the Inland Revenue response times; and if he will make a statement. [28659]

Mr. Jack *[holding answer 13 May 1996]:* Interest is chargeable on overdue tax under a number of statutory provisions, depending on the particular head of tax. The main provisions are sections 86, 87 and 87A of the Taxes Management Act 1970, which charge interest on overdue income tax, capital gains tax and corporation tax, and the pay-as-you-earn regulations, which provide for interest on overdue PAYE tax. The rules for charging interest are designed to encourage prompt payment and to neutralise the advantage late payers have over those who pay promptly, while aiming to recompense the Exchequer for the loss of taxes paid later than the due dates laid down by Parliament.

The Inland Revenue aims to reply to inquiries about assessments within 28 days, but there may be good reason why it cannot meet this target. However, if there is a long delay by the Department, for which there is no good reason, it will give up interest on tax that was unpaid during the period of the delay. The Inland Revenue publishes the rules on this in its code of practice on mistakes.

Earnings Statistics

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will list the percentage of full-time workers in England and Wales with gross weekly earnings both including and excluding overtime, of less than *(a)* £228.68, *(b)* £215.47 and *(c)* £161.60 for the categories (1) male manual, (2) male non-manual, (3) all male workers, (4) female manual, (5) female non-manual, (6) all female workers, (7) all manual, (8) all non-manual and (9) all workers; [29165]

(2) if he will list the average gross weekly earnings, both including and excluding overtime, for *(a)* all manual workers, *(b)* all non-manual workers and *(c)* all workers in England and Wales; [29164]

(3) if he will list the number and percentage of full-time workers in England and Wales with gross hourly earnings, both including and excluding overtime below *(a)* £6.03, *(b)* £5.68, *(c)* £4.24 and *(d)* £3 for (1) male manual, (2) male non-manual, (3) all male workers, (4) female manual, (5) female non-manual, (6) all female workers, (7) all manual, (8) all non-manual and (9) all workers; [29170]

(4) if he will list the percentage of full-time workers *(a)* in Scotland and *(b)* in each region in Scotland with gross weekly earnings, both including and excluding overtime, of less than (i) £228.68, (ii) £215.47 and (iii) £161.60 for the categories (1) male manual, (2) male non-manual, (3) all male workers, (4) female manual, (5) female non-manual, (6) all female workers, (7) all manual, (8) all non-manual and (9) all workers; [29169]

(5) if he will list *(a)* the mean weekly earnings, *(b)* median weekly earnings and *(c)* the distribution of earnings for those with incomes (i) under the point below which 10 per cent. of earners fall and *(b)* at the point above which 10 per cent. of earners exceed, with a breakdown by (1) all manual workers, (2) all non-manual workers and (3) all workers; [29167]

(6) what was the number and percentage of full-time workers *(a)* in Scotland and *(b)* by region in Scotland with gross hourly earnings both including and excluding overtime, below (i) £6.03, (ii) £5.68, (iii) £4.24 and (iv) £3 for (1) male manual, (2) male non-manual, (3) all male workers, (4) female manual, (5) female non-manual, (6) all female workers, (7) all manual, (8) all non-manual and (9) all workers; [29166]

(7) if he will list the average gross weekly earnings, both including and excluding overtime, for *(a)* all manual workers, *(b)* all non-manual workers and *(c)* all workers in Scotland; and if he will provide a regional breakdown of these figures. [29168]

Mrs. Angela Knight *[holding answer 13 May 1996]:* Average gross weekly earnings of manual, non-manual and all workers in England and Wales are published in table X5 of "New Earnings Survey 1995", part A, a copy of which is available in the Library. The rest of the information requested is contained in several tables which I will place in the Library.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Benefits Agency (Home Visits)

Mr. Matthew Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will correct the information regarding how many home visits were made by Benefits Agency staff for the period April 1979 to March 1980 provided in the answer to the hon. Member for Glasgow, Garscadden (Mr. Dewar) on 19 July 1995, *Official Report*, column *1503*. [29811]

Mr. Roger Evans: The information is set out in the table:

	April 1994–March 1995	*April 1991–March 1992*	*April 1989–March 1990*	*April 1984–March 1985*	*April 1979–March 1980*
Effective Supplementary Benefit/Income Support visits	498,819	552,191	803,795	3,001,362	3,288,025
Effective Contributory Benefit visits	49,186	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

Data is provisional and is subject to amendment.

Benefit Payments (Service Provider)

Mr. Anthony Coombs: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if a service provider has been selected to supply and operate the new technology which will automate post office counter operations with particular reference to the payment of social security benefits; and if he will make a statement. [29632]

Mr. Lilley: Pathway Group Ltd. has been selected as the successful service provider under the private finance initiative. Pathway Group Ltd. is a wholly owned subsidiary of ICL plc. Their major sub-contractors are Girobank, De La Rue and the Irish Post Office An Post.

The new benefit payment arrangements are intended to combat the deficiencies of the current system, including significant losses through fraudulent encashment, and will help to secure the future of the post office network. Introducing the new system will entail replacing order books and girocheques with a plastic card. The views of customers and their representatives have been taken into account to ensure that they, and post office staff, will find the new system easy to use.

The current planning assumption is that the first cards will be issued this autumn starting with some child benefit recipients. Other benefit groups will follow and the table sets out our current assumptions for the transition. These indicative plans will be subject to review in the light of experience. There will be a pilot of up to three months for each benefit group before full rollout commences. The length of time it will take to complete the change to card for all customers in each benefit group will depend on the rollout of automation into post offices, but we expect almost all customers to be paid by the card system by mid-1999.

Benefit Type	*Planned rollout start Date*
Child Benefit	October 1996
Incapacity Benefit Severe Disability Allowance Widows Benefit Maternity Allowance	February 1997
Family Credit Disability Working Allowance Earnings Top Up	May 1997
Disability Living Allowance Attendance Allowance Guardians Allowance	July 1997
Retirement Pension	July 1997
Income Support	January 1998
Jobseeker's Allowance	January 1998
Social Fund	April 1998
War Pensions	April 1998

Motability

Mr. Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what percentage of the profits of Motability Finance Ltd. are reinvested into the Motability charity. [28637]

Mr. Burt: None. Motability Finance Ltd. is a non-profit making independent company.

Mr. Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to increase the level of control exerted by the banks involved with Motability Finance Ltd. [28605]

Mr. Burt: None. Motability Finance Ltd. is an independent company which is neither funded by, nor accountable to, this Department.

Mr. Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the percentage profit margin of Motability Finance Ltd. [28345]

Mr. Burt: The amount of profit the funding banks can make from taking part in the Motability scheme is currently 1 per cent. on the average value of the funds they have invested in the scheme.

Source:

Motability's Annual Report 1994–95.

Office Space

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the square footage and cost of office apace rented by his Department and its agencies and the number of his Department's or agencies' buildings partly or fully unoccupied together with the square footage of that unoccupied office space and its estimated rental value where available in each of the past five financial years. [27721]

Mr. Burt: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is set out in the tables:

Square footage and cost of rented office space

Year	Square footage	Rent passed to property holdings (PH) division of the Department of Environment £000
1991–92	16,290,696	138,521
1992–93	18,083,520	177,214
1993–94	16,049,124	191,709
1994–95	18,029,700	201,125
1995–96	18,341,856	206,402

Property Holdings division of the Department of the Environment was responsible for the cost of vacant Common User (Office) Estate up to and including 31 March 1996.

Size and cost of vacant office space

Year	Vacant or under-utilised properties	Cost £000
1991–92 1993–94 1994–95 (first ½)	Minimal	Minimal
1994–95 (last ½)	95,046 ft²	420
1995–96	95,046 ft²	1,682

Information for each executive agency could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

In response to the information required regarding properties on the Common User (Office) Estate, I refer the hon. Member to the recent reply given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment on 31 January, *Official Report*, columns *648–50*.

OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION

UN Conference on Human Settlements

Miss Lestor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs who will be representing the Government at the UN conference on human settlements in Istanbul in June; and what new proposals the Government will make to help to ensure that city dwellers in the world's poorest countries have access to adequate housing and clean water. [29275]

Mr. Hanley: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment will be leading the UK delegation to the UN conference on human settlements—Habitat II—which is to be held in Istanbul over the period 3 to 14 June 1996. He will be accompanied by a broad-based team, which will include representatives from both the aid and diplomatic wings of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in addition to senior members of his own Department.

The sectors in which ODA assistance can best help to contribute to sustainable development vary from country to country, depending on needs, what others are doing to tackle these needs, and our capacity to contribute.

On this basis, we are currently planning new projects in urban housing and/or water and sanitation for direct ODA funding in a number of cities in India, China and Nepal. We are also investigating possibilities for assistance in Ghana and Kenya, particularly in urban water supply. In addition, we are planning to extend our current assistance in urban areas in Pakistan and in South Africa. We will also continue to provide support to non-governmental organisations through our joint funding scheme for assistance in these sectors.

Mr. John Battle (Leeds West): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, how much money Her Majesty's Government has contributed in support of the Angolan Community Rehabilitation and National Reconciliation Programme since its annoucement in September 1995. [29319]

Mr. Hanley: Since June 1993 the UK has committed almost £50 million bilaterally and through the European Commission to Angola. More than £13 million of this has been targeted on priority areas within the Community rehabilitation and national reconciliation programme announced in September 1995. Our ability to do more will depend on the Angolan Government efforts to expedite the peace process and to improve economic management.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Prisoners' Release Procedures

Lady Olga Maitland: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to review the release procedures from gaol when the release date falls on a weekend or a bank holiday. [28718]

Miss Widdecombe: There are no plans at present to amend the current legislation.

Prison Boards of Visitors

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the members representing boards of visitors on the National Advisory Council, indicating the boards on which each serves. [28972]

Miss Widdecombe: Members of boards of visitors who serve on the National Advisory Council, including the boards they represent, are as follows:

Mr. David Emanuel Abelson OBE JP: Her Majesty's Prison Latchmere House

Mrs. Sarah (Sally) Black MBE: HMP Ackington

Mrs. Barbara Mary Vyvyan Blackburn JP: HMP Risley

Mr. Hugh John Boulter: HMP Reading

Mrs. Ruth Draycott JP: HMP The Verne

Mr. Norman William Simpson: HMP Wayland

Mrs. Anthea Rosemary Taylor JP: Her Majesty's young offenders institution/remand centre Brinsford and HMP Stafford

The Chairman of the National Advisory Council is Mrs. Ruth Draycott JP.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Fraser: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many inquiries his Department has

received from housing authorities seeking to establish whether a claimant for homelessness is also seeking political asylum. [28968]

Miss Widdecombe: Since the beginning of February this year, when a central point of contact was set up within the immigration and nationality directorate, 577 inquiries have been received from housing authorities seeking to establish whether a person seeking assistance under part III of the Housing Act 1985, England and Wales, part II of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 or part II of the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1988, has applied for asylum.

Prisoners (Private Property)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his Department's policy in respect of the restrictions on prison inmates' private property. [28971]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Butler to Mr. Tom Cox, dated 15 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question about the restrictions on prisoners' private property.

Each prison decides on the type of property a prisoner is allowed to retain in line with Prison Standing Orders. Each prison may therefore allow different articles. Security, as well as health and safety aspects are considered before permitting each article.

As a result of Sir John Woodcock's report, volumetric control of prisoners' property is currently being introduced across the prison estate. Under this system, each prisoner may hold up to two boxes of property, plus one outsize item; legal papers; bedding; and an additional set of clothing.

Firearms

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proposals he has to deal with those firearms recovered by the police during the amnesty in June; what disposal procedure was adopted during the 1988 amnesty; and if he will make a statement. [28255]

Mr. Maclean: Where a surrendered firearm is selected as being of significant scientific or historical value it will be allocated to suitably authorised, publicly funded museums or other public bodies. The remainder, probably the vast majority, will be destroyed in line with the usual practice of local police forces. Similar procedures were operated in 1988.

Mr. Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what procedures, other than the national firearms amnesty, exist for members of the public to dispose legally of firearms that have been owned, or discovered, without a licence; how long these procedures have been in place; in what ways these have been publicised by his Department; and if he will make a statement. [28256]

Mr. Maclean *[holding answer 13 May 1996]:* Whether to prosecute offences of unlawful possession of firearms is a matter for the prosecuting authorities on a case-by-case basis, but Home Office guidance to the police is that no obstacle should be placed in the way of individuals who wish to hand in unlicensed or unwanted guns, even when an amnesty is not running. Our current guidance, publicly available from Her Majesty's Stationery Office since 1989 in "Firearms Law: Guidance to the Police", underlines this advice.

Buckley Hall Prison

Ms Lynne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer on 19 March, *Official Report*, column *154*, on smuggling at Buckley Hall prison, what is the estimated total amount of items that have been smuggled over the prison fence since the prison was opened; what is the estimated proportion of total smuggling caused by items being thrown over the prison fence; and what is the basis for the estimate that additional fencing will reduce the potential for this method of smuggling by 80 per cent. [28955]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Butler to Ms Liz Lynne, dated 15 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question, pursuant to the Director General's reply of 19 March, Official Report, column 154, about smuggling at Buckley Hall prison.

The estimated number of unauthorised items that have been smuggled over the fence since the prison opened is very small, but the smuggling of most articles at Buckley Hall prison takes place in this way.

Additional fencing has restricted the area adjacent to the perimeter fence which can be accessed by prisoners by 80 per cent.

Stage Hypnotism

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to publish the Home Office's recommendations on stage hypnotism. [29080]

Mr. Kirkhope: I expect to be able to announce the outcome of our review of stage hypnotism in June.

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what consideration he has given to instituting controls on the video taping of stage hypnotism shows and the sale of home videos. [29081]

Mr. Kirkhope: All videos, other than a small category of exempt works, must be certified by the British Board of Film Classification. It is a criminal offence to supply unclassified videos or to breach the classification certificate.

The recent report by an expert panel on the alleged dangers of participation in stage hypnotism found no evidence of serious risk. I do not therefore propose to place additional controls on videos of stage hypnotism.

Correspondence

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will respond to the letter from the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire, reference GK/HB/060396. [28991]

Mr. Maclean *[holding answer 13 May 1996]:* I wrote to the hon. Member on 10 May.

PRIME MINISTER

Pay Review Bodies

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Prime Minister what is the current membership of the public sector pay review bodies. [29812]

The Prime Minister: The current membership, with effect from 1 April 1996, is as listed:

Senior salaries review body

Sir Michael Perry CBE (Chairman)
Mr. Gordon Hourston
Sir Anthony Wilson
Sir Sydney Lipworth QC
Mrs. Rosemary Day
Ms Patricia Mann
Mrs. Yve Newbold
Mr. Mark Sheldon
Mr. Michael Beloff QC

Armed forces pay review body

Mr. Gordon Hourston (Chairman)
Mr. Michael Bolton
Mrs. Dorothy Venables
Mr. John Cox OBE
Mr. John Crosby
Air Chief Marshall Sir Roger Palin KCB OBE
Mr. Guy Neely
Sir Gavin Laird CBE

Review body on nursing staff, midwives, health visitors and professions allied to medicine

Mr. Bryan Rigby (Chairman)
Miss Anne Mackie OBE
Professor Gillian Raab
Ms Ruth Lea
Mrs. Shelia Gleig
Mrs. Anne Dean
Mr. Lyndon Haddon
Mr. Keith Miles

Review body on doctors' and dentists remuneration

Mr. Brandon Gough (Chairman)
Mrs. Carol Hui
Dr. Elizabeth Nelson
Mr. David Penton
Mr. Michael Innes
Mr. Christopher King CBE
Mrs. Beryl Brewer
Mr. Roderick Jackson

School teachers review body

Mr. Tony Vineall (Chairman from September 1996)
Mr. John Gardiner (Chairman until September 1996)
Mrs. Brigita Amey
Mr. Michael Harding
Mrs. Julia Cuthbertson
Mrs. Elizabeth Drummond
Miss Janet Langdon
Mr. Peter Gelding
Mr. Philip Halsey CB LVO (until September 1996).

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

HMSO (Uzbekistan)

Mr. Garrett: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster how many consultancies were invited by HMSO to tender for the investigation of its bad debts with the public authorities of Uzbekistan. [29087]

Mr. Freeman: Earlier this year I asked Binder Hamlyn to undertake an urgent investigation of matters surrounding HMSO's trade with Uzbekistan. Binder Hamlyn was already acting as reporting accountant for the HMSO privatisation, and so had an unrivalled knowledge of the business. No wider tendering procedure was necessary or, given the urgency of the situation, desirable.

Mr. Garrett: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster how much in fees was paid to Mr. Paul Howell by HMSO for his study of its bad debt in Uzbekistan. [29088]

Mr. Freeman: Mr. Howell was engaged by HMSO to assist in progressing its trade in Uzbekistan. It is normal policy not to disclose the terms of individual consultancy appointments for reasons of commercial confidentiality.

Central Office of Information

Mr. Matthew Banks: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what progress has been made in improving the efficiency of the Central Office of Information following his announcement in November that it would remain as a next steps agency. [29752]

Mr. Freeman: Following an efficiency report by Kinsley Lord, I have agreed a substantial programme of efficiency improvements and restructuring of the COI, which will in future concentrate on procurement rather than the direct provision of services. This programme is being carried forward by the chief executive, and is due to be completed by April 1997. But in view of the fact that the current chief executive is due to retire shortly, I am setting in train the process of appointing by open competition a new chief executive, who will have the responsibility of carrying forward the programme of change and ensuring the continuation of the valuable service provided by COI.

Public Appointments Unit

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will make a statement on the current role of the public appointments unit. [29810]

Mr. Freeman: The public appointments unit's role is as set out in "The Government's Response to the First Report from the Committee on Standards in Public Life", Cm 2931. It advises, through the head of the home civil service, on certain appointments in which the Prime Minister has an involvement; maintains a central list of around 5,000 potential appointees; acts as an initial point of contact for individuals seeking public appointments; and provides Departments with names from the list suitable for specific appointments, and other relevant advice.

To keep Departments informed about this continuing role, the unit is issuing guidance on public appointment procedures which supplements that of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. I am placing copies of this supplementary guidance in the Libraries.

Chessington Computer Centre

Mr. Tracey: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will make an announcement on the progress of the sale of Chessington Computer Centre. [29813]

Mr. Freeman: I told the House on 17 October last year that it was the Government's intention to sell Chessington Computer Centre as a single viable business in a way which would ensure that it retained its reputation for the provision of high-quality services to Government Departments and the wider public sector while allowing it to benefit from the freedom and opportunities for attracting new customers to be gained outside the constraints of operating within government.

A large number of expressions of interest were received following the advertisement of the sale in December last year. These have subsequently been reduced through pre-qualification and indicative bid procedures. A final shortlist of three has now been selected. Those being invited to submit final bids are:

The Capita Group

CMG Computer Management Group

The Management Employee buy-out team in partnership with Integris UK.

I believe that this shortlist will lead to final bids which maximise the prospects of securing good long-term value for money for the Government and taxpayer while meeting the objectives set for the sale of the business.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Youth Training

Mr. Byers: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of people on youth training *(a)* failed to complete the course and *(b)* failed to obtain a recognised qualification, for each training and enterprise council in the last year for which information is available. [29232]

Mr. Paice *[holding answer 13 May 1996]:* The available information, which comes from the national follow-up survey of youth training trainees, is contained in a number of tables and will be placed in the Library. These results are consistent with the national totals published monthly in "Labour Market Trends" . The figures overstate the extent to which young people leave the programme early. They include a significant number who simply switched from one training provider to another, as well as trainees who left early having already achieved their full qualification. Those not gaining a qualification will include many who subsequently obtained a job, or continued in further education and training.

"Going GM" Costs

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much has been spent by her Department on "Going GM" conferences; and how much has been spent on "Going GM" packs sent to schools and school governers in each of the past three years. [29335]

Mrs. Gillan: Grant-maintained information packs can contain a variety of publications, so it is not possible to identify the cost of the packs within overall spending on publications relating to grant-maintained status. The available information is set out in the following table:

£

Expenditure on:	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*
Going GM conferences[1]	270,298	222,696	217.234
GM information[2]	320,000	380,000	178,000
Total	590,298	602,696	395,234

[1] The expenditure figures for "Going GM" conferences include venue costs, the contracted support services and mailings.

[2] The expenditure figures for GM information represent the total production and distribution costs of all GM publications over the last three years.

The table refers to financial years.

Investors in People

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to her answer of 30 April, *Official Report,* columns 41-42, how many firms with under 50 employees *(a)* are currently participating in investors in people and *(b)* have achieved the standard, (i) in total, (ii) in each region and (iii) in each parliamentary constituency. [29157]

Mr. Paice: As at 24 March 1996 a total of 10,558 firms with under 50 employees were participating in investors in people of which 1,525 firms are already recognised as having achieved the standard.

A breakdown of the figures by parliamentary constituency is not available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. However, a regional breakdown is provided in the following table:

Investors in People commitments and recognitions in firms with under 50 employees

Region	*Commitments*	*Recognitions*
East Midlands	874	101
Eastern	840	69
London	1,205	99
Merseyside	268	62
North West	1,277	160
Northern	351	83
South East	1,140	134
South West	768	246
West Midlands	804	158
Yorkshire and Humberside	691	166
Wales	498	107
Scotland	277	122
Northern Ireland	40	18
Total	9,033	1,525

Grant-maintained Schools, Wiltshire

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will list the grant-maintained schools in the county of Wiltshire, together with the number of pupils on the roll at each school. [29082]

Mrs. Gillan: The information requested is detailed in the following table:

GM school	*Number of pupils on roll*[1]
Aloeric School	403
Bishop Wordsworth's School	720
Blunsden St. Andrews Primary School	135
Bradon Forest School	993
Castle Primary School, Lugershall	293
Castledown Comprehensive School	423
Clarendon Infants School	248
Clarendon Junior School	227
Devizes School	1,046
Downton CE Primary School	228
Frogwell Primary School	418
Hardenhuish School	1,140
Holy Rood Junior School	240
Holy Trinity CE School	205
Kingsdown School	955
Lavington Comprehensive School	514
Lowbourne Infants' School	253
Lowbourne Junior School	270
Matravers School	651
Paxcroft Primary School	239
Pewsey Vale School	418
Pitton Primary School	72
Rowde CE Primary School	144
Sheldon School	1,125
South Wilts Grammar School for Girls	814
St. Augustine RC Comprehensive School	615
St. Edmund's RC Primary School	210
St. George's RC Primary School	174
St. John's School	1,370
St. Joseph's RC Comprehensive School	1,119
St. Joseph's RC Primary School	204
St. Mary's RC Primary School, Chippenham	273
St. Mary's RC Primary School, Swindon	264
Studley Green Primary School	314
Sutton Benger CE Primary School	110
The Commonweal School	929
The John Bentley School	1,095
Wingfield CE Primary School	70
Wyvern College	521
Zouch Primary School	294

[1] Number of pupils on roll obtained from January 1995. DFEE School Census.

Nursery Education Inspections

Mr. Spearing: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what occupations are *(a)* included and *(b)* excluded by the provision of the substantial experience of providing for education of four-year-olds in the advertisement for applicants for registered nursery education inspectors. [29519]

Mr. Robin Squire: This is a matter for Her Majesty's chief inspector of schools, who heads the Office for Standards in Education. I have asked Mr. Chris Woodhead to write to the hon. Member.

Mr. Spearing: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what instructions she has given to Ofsted in respect of persons of substantial experience in provision of education for four-year-olds in relation to applications for becoming nursery education inspectors. [29520]

Mr. Squire: The Nursery Education and Grant-Maintained Schools Bill requires the chief inspector to satisfy himself that nursery education inspectors are fit and proper persons to undertake nursery education inspections, and capable of conducting them competently and effectively, before registration.

Employees' Rights

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what provision is available to employees of executive agencies under the control of her Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [27591]

Mr. Robin Squire *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* Responsibility for the subject of the questions has been delegated to the Employment Service Agency and the Teachers' Pensions Agency under the chief executives. I have asked for them to arrange for replies to be given.

Letter from Denyse Metcalfe to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 10 May 1996:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question about provisions for employees within the Executive Agency.

The arrangements that apply to the Teachers' Pensions Agency are the same as that of the Department for Education and Employment and I would refer you to the reply sent to you on 7 May 1996, Official Report, column 107-110.

I hope this is helpful.

Letter from Robert Horne to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 15 May 1996:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question, in the absence of the Chief Executive, about provisions for employees within the executive agencies.

General guidance for employees and their managers is contained in a number of documents. The ES has nearly completed the process of putting this guidance together in 2 volumes of 'The ES and You'; the first covering 'Your rights and responsibilities' and the second 'A guide for managers'. Some of the information you request is still contained in a chapter of the old guidance which has yet to be incorporated into the new volumes. Copies of this guidance and that for personnel managers on various flexible work patterns are enclosed, and also placed in the Library. Together these will provide information on maternity leave and pay; paternity leave and parental leave; flexible working hours; part time work; leave to care for sick children; homeworking; term time contracts; carers leave and career break schemes. This covers your items a—f, h—j, n and 0.

Annual Hours contracts (item k) are not offered as standard in the Employment Service and therefore no guidance is available. Likewise, childcare allowances (item m) are not available, although the ES does pay additional childcare costs where extra hours are worked. The relevant extract from the ES guide to expenses will also be sent to you.

Job sharing (item g) is encouraged and my Personnel Managers have the flexibility to manage this locally in the light of people's requests and operational need. No central guidance is produced.

Likewise, the ES supports the establishment of workplace nurseries (item 1) and has recently opened one in Sheffield. Local arrangements vary widely depending on need and the provision already available. Often nurseries will be shared with other organisations and Government Departments and Agencies. Full details of Civil Service nursery provision is contained in the Childcare Bulletin produced by the Office of Public Service.

I hope this is helpful.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Business Employment (Strangford)

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many businesses employ fewer than *(a)* 10, *(b)* 50 and *(c)* 100 employees in (i) Northern Ireland and (ii) the Strangford constituency. [28850]

Mr. Ancram: There are approximately 15,325 non-agricultural enterprises in the private sector in Northern Ireland which employ fewer than 10 employees; 19,669 which employ fewer than 50 and 20,182 which employ fewer than 100. Similar information for the Strangford constituency is not readily available.

Average Incomes

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the average per capita income in *(a)* Northern Ireland and *(b)* each constituency within Northern Ireland; what have been the figures for each of the past five years; and if he will make a statement. [28849]

Sir John Wheeler: The average gross weekly incomes in Northern Ireland, for each of the years 1990–1995, was as follows:

	£
1994–95[1]	326.32
1993	302.71
1992	281.25
1991	285.21
1990	256.59
1989	220.46

[1] Financial year April 1994–March 1995.

This information is taken from the published results of the Northern Ireland family expenditure survey. Due to a change in definitions, the income measure for 1992 and subsequent years is not strictly comparable with those for earlier years. Information on income is not available by parliamentary constituency.

Jobs and Investment (Strangford)

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern ireland what was the last project in which the Industrial Development Board was involved which resulted in investment in the Strangford constituency; what was the total amount of investment; and how many jobs were created. [28847]

Mr. Ancram: The most recent project in the Strangford constituency assisted by the Industrial Development Board was the £1.25 million investment by Lamont Textiles in the B. H. McCleary operation at Ballygowan in 1995. The project holds out the prospect of 14 additional jobs in the manufacture of polypropylene carpet yarn.

Veterinary Surgeons

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many veterinary surgeons are employed by the Government in Northern Ireland; what was the number five and 10 years ago; and if he will make a statement on the adequacy of the supply to deal with problems arising from bovine spongiform encephalopathy. [28851]

Mr. Ancram: The number of veterinary surgeons employed by the Government in Northern Ireland at April 1996 is 135, compared with 114 at April 1991 and 103 at April 1986.

The number employed is adequate to deal with present problems arising from BSE.

Traffic Offences

Mr. Soley: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will publish the figures for traffic offences by police division between April 1994 to April 1995. [28603]

Sir John Wheeler: The information is not available in the form requested as traffic statistics are not all held on a divisional basis, nor are they held by fiscal year.

The following Northern Ireland total figures refer to the period 1 January 1994 to 31 December 1994:

	Number
Persons given advice and warning	261,472
Fixed penalty notices issued	68,294
Persons proceeded against	22,926
Total traffic offences detected	352,692

The following figures are available by division and for the period requested:

Number of persons proceeded against[1] for motoring offences 1 April 1994 to 31 March 1995

Division	*Persons proceeded against[1]*
A	1,372
B	1,506
D	3,102
E	1,245
G	1,319
H	861
J	1,317
K	1,243
L	1,118
N	1,714
O	1,146
P	1,027
Total	16,970

[1] Figures refer to primary offence only.

Nursery Voucher Scheme

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what tendering procedures *(a)* are being planned and *(b)* have been implemented for the appointment of a voucher company for pre-school education; and when he estimates an appointment will be made. [28700]

Mr. Ancram: Advertisements have been placed in *The Guardian*, the *Financial Times*, the *Sunday Times* and the *Times Educational Supplement* seeking expressions of interest in tendering for the contract to administer the national phase of the nursery education voucher scheme. It is estimated that a contractor will be appointed by the end of September 1996.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he intends to publish a draft Order in Council for the proposed voucher scheme for pre-school children. [28701]

Mr. Ancram: I intend to publish a draft Order in Council, which will include provisions relating to the pre-school voucher scheme, later this year. It is not possible to give a precise date for its publication.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what estimate he has made of the administrative costs per place of the proposed voucher scheme for pre-school education. [28699]

Mr. Ancram: I am at present consulting on the Government's proposals for the operation of the pre-school voucher scheme in Northern Ireland. It would not be possible or appropriate to provide any estimate of administrative costs per place in advance of decisions arising from this consultation.

Pre-school Curriculum

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he commissioned the Northern Ireland curriculum council to prepare a pre-school curriculum; and when he expects the council to report. [28702]

Mr. Ancram: The Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment was commissioned on 7 March 1996 to prepare, and consult on, a suitable pre-school curriculum and to report to the Department by 31 October 1996.

Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the estimated number of cattle which will have to be slaughtered in Northern Ireland in accordance with the Government's BSE eradication policy. [28848]

Mr. Ancram: It is estimated that more than 40,000 cattle are on farms in Northern Ireland awaiting slaughter under the Government's over-30 months slaughter scheme, which came into operation recently.

Notwithstanding the requirement for slaughter under this scheme, all suspect BSE cases are slaughtered as and when they are identified.

Nursery Education

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what are the maximum group size and staffing ratios *(a)* recommended and *(b)* allowed in nursery education in Northern Ireland. [28703]

Mr. Ancram: The maximum group size to staffing ratio specified for nursery education in Northern Ireland is 25 children to two adults. No other maximum ratio is allowed.

Manufacturing Business

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people were employed in manufacturing business in *(a)* Northern Ireland and *(b)* the Strangford constituency, for each of the past five years. [28588]

Mr. Ancram: Information on the number of employees in manufacturing is obtained from the Northern Ireland census of employment, which is currently conducted every two years. The available figures are:

Employees in employment in manufacturing

	1989	*1991*	*1993*
Northern Ireland	105,631	104,840	101,840
Strangford Constituency	4,273	4,728	4,423

Further Education

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the capital expenditure, by project, on further education in Northern Ireland in the current financial year. [29181]

Mr. Ancram: The information is as follows:

	£000
Institutions of further and higher education	
North east (Magherafelt)	1,505
North west (Londonderry)	1,100
Newtownabbey	2,560
North Down and Ards	523
Colleges of further education	
Armagh	53

Child Support Agency

Mr. Nigel Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans he has to publish details of the targets for the Child Support Agency; and if he will make a statement. [29815]

Mr. Moss: The Child Support Agency will publish its 1996–97 business plan today. Copies will be placed in the Library.

The targets that I have set for the Child Support Agency for 1996–97 are:

A target band of between £7.9 million and £8.3 million of maintenance to be either collected, or arranged for direct payment from absent parents to parents with care.[1]

95 per cent. of payments made to parents with care to be made in 10 working days of receipt from an absent parent.

To achieve a continuing improvement in accuracy, so that in at least 85 per cent. of cases checked during March 1997 the cash value will be for the correct amount.

Where a client is dissatisfied with a child support officer's decision and requests a review, 55 per cent. to be cleared within 13 weeks; 80 per cent. to be cleared within 26 weeks; and no more than 15 per cent. to be older than six months as at 31 March 1997.

65 per cent. of new maintenance applications to be cleared within 26 weeks and as at 31 March 1997 no more than 2 per cent. of applications received by the agency to be over 12 months old.[2]

To manage the agency's resources so as to deliver its business plan within the gross budget allocation as adjusted during the course of the year; this includes the administration of the Belfast Child Support Agency Centre on behalf of the GB agency.

The targets are challenging and will require a substantial improvement in a number of areas of the agency's performance. The new targets include measures of accuracy and of the time taken to provide services. This underlines the agency's continuing focus on quality and client services in 1996–97.

[1] This target includes cases where maintenance is paid direct by the absent parent to the parent with care.

[2] For this target, applications include all cases received via the Social Security Agency or from private clients.

WALES

Speech and Language Therapists

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the number of speech and language therapists at each grade from spine points 23 to 27 in each of the past five years. [28446]

Mr. Richards: Reliable information for the particular spine points requested is not available. However, the total whole-time equivalent numbers of speech and language therapists directly employed by the NHS in Wales is given in the following table. Data for 1994 and 1995 may exclude a small number of staff paid on local pay scales for whom no details of occupation are available centrally.

Staff in post at 30 September (whole-time equivalent numbers)

1991: 153

1992: 168

1993: 177

1994: 180

1995: 199

Brain Search Facilities

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the *(a)* centres and *(b)* hospitals which provide minute brain search facilities; and if he will make a statement. [28634]

Mr. Richards: In Wales the majority of NHS trusts with acute hospital facilities are able to offer access to neurological services. Neurosurgical services are provided at the University Hospital of Wales and Morriston hospital. Further information should be obtained directly from the relevant chief executives.

Physiotherapists

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many placements were available for physiotherapy students for each year since 1988; and if he will make a statement. [28654]

Mr. Richards: The number of placements is dependent on the individual college's course and the requirements of the validating body. This is not recorded centrally.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of state for Wales how many people have qualified as physiotherapists since 1988; and if he will make a statement. [28707]

Mr. Richards: The number of physiotherapists qualifying has been monitored centrally only since the introduction of the towards 2000 arrangements for non-medical education and training in 1993. The figures are as follows:

July 1993: 32

July 1994: 26

July 1995: 31

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of the current number of physiotherapy vacancies; and if he will make a statement. [28653]

Mr. Richards: This information is not routinely collected centrally. However, a recent survey of physiotherapy departments estimated that there were some 77 WTE vacancies in total across Wales which took account of 62 additional posts arising from local service developments over the past two years.

Teachers

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is the total number of *(a)* male and *(b)* female primary and secondary school teachers; and how many (i) male and (ii) female headteachers there are in each sector in Wales. [28709]

Mr. Richards: The information requested is contained in the following table. The number of qualified teachers—full and part time—and headteachers is shown as at January 1995, for local education authority-maintained and grant-maintained schools.

Qualified teachers at January 1995

	Primary schools		*Secondary schools*	
	Males	*Females*	*Males*	*Females*
Full time teachers (including headteachers)	2,430	9,412	5,807	6,049
Part time teachers	24	1,416	137	761
Headteachers	939	752	203	24

Source:
1995 Schools Census.

Railway Contractors

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has made to the contractors supplying railway services between Cardiff and the north Wales coast to increase the number of through trains each day in each direction; and if he will make a statement. [28595]

Mr. Hague: None. Any increase in the number of through trains between Cardiff and the north Wales coast is currently a matter for the British Railways Board and the train operating companies concerned.

South Wales and West currently operates one through train between Cardiff and Holyhead, via Crewe. The franchising director has undertaken consultation on the draft passenger service requirements for the South Wales and West franchise. He is assessing the representations he has received and will publish the final PSR in due course. The draft PSR specifies services between Cardiff central and Crewe. Services between Crewe and Holyhead will be specified in the PSR for the North West Regional Railways franchise, which the franchising director will develop in due course. Franchise operators are free to operate services in addition to the PSR in response to demand.

Forestry

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) what mechanism exists for deciding on a Welsh forest policy; [28428]

(2) how Welsh input into the evolution of United Kingdom forest policy is ensured; [28429]

(3) what direct responsibilities he has for forest policy in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [28427]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: My right hon. Friend has responsibility for forestry in Wales and, together with the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, is jointly responsible for forestry policy in Great Britain.

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what action he has taken in respect of the conclusions of the Minister's working group on forests in Wales. [28430]

Mr. Jones: My right hon. Friend has asked the Forestry Commission, through the Forestry Authority for Wales, to take the lead role in furthering the issues raised by the Minister's working group.

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is his role in respect of the management of the Forestry Commission estate in Wales as it relates to *(a)* wood, *(b)* conservation and *(c)* landscape. [28431]

Mr. Jones: My right hon. Friend approves the Commission's plans for managing its estate, including those relating to wood production, conservation and landscape.

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) what corporate plans subject to his approval exist for the Welsh public woodland; [28432]

(2) what targets have been set for Forest Enterprise in Wales; and what role he has in the setting of those targets. [28425]

Mr. Jones: Forest Enterprise's business plan for 1996–97, a copy of which is in the Library, includes targets for Forest Enterprise's activities throughout Great Britain. The plan and the targets were approved by my right hon. Friend.

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what information he has evaluated on the end use of wood from publicly owned forests in Wales; and what assessment he has made as to whether such wood is used to the best advantage in strengthening and diversifying the economy of rural Wales. [28424]

Mr. Jones: The Minister's Welsh forestry group investigated the timber market in Wales. More timber is now processed in Wales than is grown in Wales and over £350 million has been invested in Welsh timber processing industries. These industries are among the most technically advanced in the world; they make 20 per cent. of the newsprint, 25 per cent. of the particleboard and 37 per cent. of the medium density fibreboard produced in Britain. The development of this sector has been a major industrial success story in Wales.

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will ensure that accounts are published for the Welsh activities of Forest Enterprise. [28426]

Mr. Jones: Forest Enterprise's accounts are published in the Forestry Commission's annual report; separate accounts are not prepared for Wales.

Robert Powell (Medical Treatment)

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he received the report of the inquiry into the keeping of the general practitioner records pertaining to the appeal concerning the medical treatment of Robert Powell of Ystradegynlais, Powys; when he expects to publish the report; and in what form. [29387]

Mr. Hague: My Department received the report on 17 April and is currently considering its contents. When this process is complete I will write to the hon. Member.

South East Wales Ambulance Trust

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what consultations he has had with the chairman of the South East Wales ambulance trust concerning the advertising of the chief executive's post; and if he will make a statement. [29388]

Mr. Hague: None. The appointment of a chief executive for the trust is a matter for the chairman and his non-executive directors. My officials have briefed the chairman on the statutory requirements for such an appointment and on the accountability role associated with the post.

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what consultations he has had with the chairman of the South East Wales ambulance trust concerning the minimum level of qualifications acceptable for the post of gold commander for major incidents. [29389]

Mr. Hague: I have held no such consultations. It is for the boards of NHS ambulance trusts to ensure that those nominated to take on the responsibilities of gold commander or equivalent have sufficient authority and expertise to carry out this important role.

It is for health authorities to ensure that appropriate arrangements and staff are in place.

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what consultations he has had with the chairman of the South East Wales ambulance trust concerning the *(a)* number of trained paramedics available by the end of 1996, *(b)* participation in research and development groups by paramedics and *(c)* numbers of training places for paramedics and numbers of training officers. [29390]

Mr. Hague: None. These are matters primarily for the trust. However, the Government's target of a paramedic on all front-line emergency vehicles by the end of 1996 is monitored by my Department. The numbers of training places for paramedics are determined on an all-Wales basis in line with employers' requirements.

SCOTLAND

Irvine Development Corporation

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) what was the district valuer's valuation of the housing stock of Irvine development corporation; [29195]

(2) what value was put on the properties of Irvine development corporation by the district valuer; when this valuation took place; and if this valuation was passed to all the bidders for the housing stock of Irvine development corporation. [28992]

Mr. Kynoch *[holding answer 13 May 1996]:* For the disposal of tenanted housing stock, the district valuer's valuation was £33.043 million, assuming the warden costs of sheltered housing were borne by the social work budget, or £32.269 million if these costs were met by rental income from the housing.

The valuation took place on 17 August 1995 and was subsequently passed to both bidders for the housing stock of Irvine development corporation.

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what was the value of the bid lodged by Irvine housing association for the housing stock of Irvine development corporation; and for what reason it was allowed. [29194]

Mr. Kynoch *[holding answer 13 May 1996]:* The aggregate of the cash bids made by Irvine housing association was £22.777 million. My right hon. Friend concluded that the bids were value for money, particularly when broader factors were taken into account. These included VAT which is not recoverable by the housing association, the opportunity to give tenants a genuine choice in the ballot between a municipal and non-municipal landlord and the possibility of attracting private sector funding into tenanted housing in Irvine.

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) what procedure was used by his Department in scrutinising the bids lodged by prospective landlords for taking over the housing stock of Irvine development corporation; what guidance was issued to Cunninghame district council and North Ayrshire council, relating to the valuation which it has to put on the properties of Irvine development corporation; and in what respect this guidance differed from that given to Irvine housing association; [28993]

(2) against what criteria the Scottish Office assessed the bids lodged for the housing stock of Irvine development corporation. [29193]

Mr. Kynoch *[holding answer 13 May 1996]:* During 1992 and 1993 the Scottish Office issued comprehensive guidance about housing disposal to the development corporations, the district councils in their areas, hon. Members with constituencies in the areas of new towns and other interested parties. The guidance applied to all bidders and covered all aspects of the process including bidding, valuation and appraisal of bids.

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how much Irvine housing association has received in funding from *(a)* Irvine development corporation and *(b)* Scottish Homes. [29075]

Mr. Kynoch *[holding answer 13 May 1996]:* Scottish Homes has to date paid £15,050 to Irvine housing association. The development corporation has not provided funds to the association.

Ambulance Base, Kyleakin

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what established planning restriction exists from Kyle Farm road end to the Lucy Burn at Kyleakin, Isle of Skye; and if he will make a statement. [29241]

Mr. Kynoch *[holding answer 14 May 1996]:* There is no established statutory planning policy which restricts development at this location.

Wind Farms

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) what representations he has received from those involved in the tourist industry on the east coast of Sutherland about the potential impact on local visitor numbers of proposals to establish wind farms at West Garty and Gartymore; [29483]

(2) what representations he has received from crofters about the proposal to develop a wind farm on common grazing land at Gartymore, East Sutherland; [29482]

(3) pursuant to his answer on 7 May, *Official Report*, column *63*, how many of the letters in support of proposals to develop wind farms at West Garty and Gartymore were received from those who have a financial interest in the proposed developments through payments they will receive from RES Ltd. and Micon Ltd. if the developments proceed. [29485]

Mr. Kynoch *[holding answer 14 May 1996]:* Of the 412 letters of objection that my right hon. Friend has received about the wind farm proposals at West Garty and Gartymore, Sutherland, 11 proprietors of various tourism related businesses have commented on the development's potential harm to the industry.

One crofter has written against the proposal, but only in general terms. Letters in a similar vein have been received from two local farmers and a shareholder in local grazing.

Of the 10 letters written in support, five were received from family members with a financial interst in the developments.

Local Authorities (Structure Plans)

Mr. Gallie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will devolve more power to local authorities in Scotland in relation to structure plans; and if he will make a statement. [29814]

Mr. Michael Forsyth: I am delighted to announce a new initiative today which is consistent with my general aim to devolve more power from central to local government in Scotland. I propose to give councils greater freedom for deciding how best to allocate appropriate land for housing in structure plans on the basis of their own detailed knowledge of local circumstances and priorities, including housing demand. This responds to representations about the inflexibility of the present policy and persistent claims about central Government imposing unacceptable levels of development on existing communities. Accordingly, what I propose represents a change from the current position where the Government set out guidance on what needs to be provided and I take decisions about whether to approve or modify the structure plans in the light of these. In my view, this is too prescriptive and means too many planning decisions are taken centrally.

My new policy will enable authorities to take on real responsibility for deciding what level of provision is appropriate in their areas having regard both to those who want to live in the area and those who already live there. To assist authorities with this task I will be publishing shortly fresh guidance which will set out the factors authorities should take into account. In addition to housing demand these will include economic, infrastructure, environmental and amenity considerations with a view to authorities striking a balance in the light of local priorities. Authorities will now, for example, be better able to protect small towns and villages from inappropriate large scale development where they consider this would adversely affect the local environment and amenity.

In considering the structure plans which come before me, I will retain my present obligation to satisfy myself that the way authorities have carried out this balancing is reasonable and complies with policy guidance.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Scott Report

Sir Colin Shepherd: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee if the Committee has considered how the appendices to the Scott report will be made available to hon. Members; and if he will make a statement. [28978]

Mr. Michael J. Martin: At its meeting on 23 April, the Administration Committee, following a request from Madam Speaker, considered whether the laying of the appendices to the Scott report in CD-Rom form would be acceptable to the House, with or without paper copy, and what other provisions should be attached to such laying.

Following similar consideration by the Information Committee at its meeting on 29 April, Madam Speaker has endorsed the following recommendations:

(a) that two CD-Rom copies and two paper copies should be deposited in the Votes and Proceedings Office by the Department of Trade and Industry in the normal way after the House has agreed to the proposed Address for an Unopposed Return; and that a further two paper copies should be available in the Library as loan copies;

(b) that the CD-Rom should be made available to the Deliverer of the Vote in numbers which he deems necessary to satisfy the requirements of hon. Members until the end of the Parliament;

(c) that the CD-Rom should be compatible with, and available on, the parliamentary data and video network;

(d) that a machine capable of accessing the CD-Rom should be available in the Library for the use of hon. Members.

The Administration Committee considers that acceptance by the House of the appendices in CD-Rom should not be seen as creating a precedent, but rather as an acknowledgement of a possibly unique situation.

Until every hon. Member has access to the parliamentary data and video network or has their own CD-Rom reader, the Committee does not consider it acceptable for CD-Roms to be the usual way of presenting papers to the House. However, if a similar proposal were to arise in the future, the Committee would be prepared to consider it on its merits.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Vietnamese Refugee Camps (Hong Kong)

Mr. Mike O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many Vietnamese refugees are located in camps or similar facilities in Hong Kong and its territories; and what proposals he has to address their needs when the Chinese Government take control of Hong Kong. [29273]

Mr. Hanley: On 1 May 1996 there were 19,456 Vietnamese in camps in Hong Kong, including 1,366 refugees, 17,762 non-refugees to be repatriated to Vietnam and 328 cases pending screening. Our objective is to have the camps cleared by the time sovereignty is transferred to China, but the needs of any Vietnamese remaining in camps in Hong Kong after 1 July 1997 would be a matter for the Government of the Special Administrative Region.

Malaysia

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will discuss with the Malaysian high commissioner in London representations he has received about the impact of the Bakun dam project. [28423]

Mr. Hanley: We have no plans to discuss the Bakun dam project with the Malaysian high commissioner in London.

UN Peacekeeping Budget

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the impact of reductions in the UN peacekeeping budget arising from diversion of funds to the regular UN budget. [29510]

Sir Nicholas Bonsor: The practice of borrowing funds from UN peacekeeping budgets to meet cash shortfalls in the UN regular budget is a short-term measure. It does not result in any overall reduction of UN peacekeeping budgets. However, we oppose this on grounds of good practice.

HEALTH

Pharmaceuticals (Safety)

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy to require his Department's regulatory bodies to disclose all relevant safety data to *(a)* their own advisory committees and *(b)* the relevant manufacturers in advance of any decision being taken about the safety of pharmaceutical products. [25809]

Mr. Malone: It is normal policy to disclose all relevant safety data available to our advisory committees and, when not restricted by confidentiality agreements, the relevant data are provided to pharmaceutical companies whose products are under consideration. If compulsory regulatory action is proposed, it is the policy of the Medicines Control Agency to provide the relevant pharmaceutical companies with a copy of the assessment reports prior to a final decision being made.

Official Hospitality

Mr. Tony Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much his Department spent on official hospitality in 1994–95 and the financial year to date; and what is the 1995–96 projected budget for official hospitality. [5581]

Mr. Horam *[pursuant to his reply, 18 December 1995, c. 935]:* There was an error in the figure given for the Department's agencies. Expenditure on hospitality to the end of November 1995 was as follows:

	£
Department	49,779
Agencies	19,277
Total	69,076

The projected total expenditure for 1995–96 that was provided for the agencies should therefore have been about £38,000, not £75,000.

Mr. Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much was spent on official hospitality by his Department and all associated agencies in the financial year 1995–96. [28575]

Mr. Horam *[holding answer 9 May 1996]:* The amount of expenditure on official hospitality in the financial year 1995–96 was:

	£
Department of Health	73,516
Agencies	36,304
Total	109,820

General Practitioners

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the additional amounts in the years 1995–96 and 1996–97 which would have been received by GPs in *(a)* Waltham Forest and Redbridge and *(b)* London if deprivation payments were based on information available in the 1991 census. [28023]

Mr. Malone: Deprivation payments for 1995–96 and 1996–97 are, in all cases, based on 1991 census data.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many general practitioners were registered in each family health service authority or its equivalent at 30 December in each of the last 20 years. [29202]

Mr. Malone: The information will be placed in the Library.

Mr. Bayley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much was paid to fundholding GP practices to meet computerisation costs in each year since 1990–91. [29018]

Mr. Malone: Information is not available for 1990–91. Information on the subsequent years is contained in the 1996 departmental report, copies of which are available in the Library.

Smoking

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what new programmes he is evaluating to publicise to young women the dangers to their health of smoking. [29231]

Mr. Horam: The Health Education Authority continually evaluates the effectiveness of the current national smoking education campaign. A new teenage smoking campaign, starting later this year, will also be carefully evaluated. Both campaigns contain elements which are targeted at young women.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the financial cost incurred in 1995 by Her Majesty's Government in respect of campaigns on the dangers of smoking. [28974]

Mr. Horam: In the 1995–96 financial year, the Department provided £6.5 million for anti-smoking campaign activity in England. In addition, health authorities and trusts run local anti-smoking campaigns.

Long-term Care

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what plans he has to help the families of disabled people who sell their *(a)* homes and *(b)* other assets to meet the costs of long-term care; [29064]

(2) what assessment he has made as to how partnership schemes in the United States provide insurance against the costs of long-term care for disabled people; [29062]

(3) what are the current arrangements for means testing disabled people when establishing how much they should contribute to the costs of their long-term care; [29035]

(4) what discussions he has had with representatives from the insurance industry regarding the development of immediate needs annuities designed for disabled people wishing to insure against the costs of long-term care; [29030]

(5) what plans he has to meet representatives of *(a)* the insurance industry and *(b)* organisations representing disabled people to discuss how best disabled people can insure against the costs of long-term care; and what steps he has taken to canvass the opinion of disabled groups regarding the consultation paper "A New Partnership for Care in Old Age;" [29034]

(6) what plans the Government have for helping disabled people insure against the costs of long-term care in the event that the insurance industry does not provide insurance schemes designed specifically for disabled people. [29063]

Mr. Bowis: The consultation paper "A New Partnership for Care in Old Age" sets out the Government's proposals for helping people to make better provision for the costs of long-term care through greater flexibility in pension provision and through a partnership scheme. The proposals are likely to be of most interest to those who need care in old age, but people who need long-term care at a younger age may also be able to benefit from them.

The partnership scheme would enable people to protect more of their assets from the means test for residential care arranged by local authorities. The means test does not make any distinction between the various client groups, such as elderly or disabled people, in assessing ability to contribute to the cost of residential care.

It is proposed that the scheme would be open not only to those who take out long-term care indemnity insurance, as in the United States schemes, but also to those who take out immediate needs annuities. It would therefore potentially be of benefit to those whose condition meant that they could obtain insurance only for a very high premium, if at all.

As the consultation paper makes clear, the terms on which indemnity insurance and annuities are offered are a matter for the insurance and annuity providers themselves to determine—subject, when the relevant provisions have been commenced, to the Disability Discrimination Act.

We welcome comments on our proposals, by 14 June, from all interested parties.

Mr. Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many disabled people at present are insured against the costs of long-term care using an indemnity insurance scheme. [29032]

Mr. Bowis: The information is not available.

Mr. Denham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the total public cost of a partnership scheme, in accordance with *(a)* paragraph 9.6 and *(b)* paragraph 9.7 of "A New Partnership for Care in Old Age" assuming an individual achieves total asset protection by purchasing £30,000 of care insurance, requires five years of care and exhausts their insurance entitlement in (i) one year, (ii) two years, (iii) three years and (iv) four years with the remaining years of care being provided by a local authority at a cost of £12,500 per annum, to which the individual contributes £2,000 per annum. [29521]

Mr. Bowis: I refer the hon. Member to the reply that I gave him on 14 May, at column *419*.

Sunderland Health Authority

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many applications, broken down by gender, were received for the position of chairman of the new Sunderland health authority; how many candidates matched the criteria for selection; how many were considered for the short-list; and what criteria were used for the final selection. [29200]

Mr. Malone: Twelve men and one woman applied for the chairmanship of the new Sunderland health authority. Four men and one woman were shortlisted for interview. Candidates were assessed against the job description for health authority chairmen, copies of which will be placed in the Library.

Mental Illness (London)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is currently the number of people living in the Greater London area who are registered with local health authorities as being mentally ill. [29069]

Mr. Bowis: This information is not available centrally.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many new acute psychiatric beds were established during 1995 at NHS hospitals in the Greater London area. [29056]

Mr. Bowis: This information is not available centrally.

Mental Hospitals (Sales)

Mr. Milburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the proceeds from each sale of water tower mental hospital property in each of the last 10 years. [29470]

Mr. Bowis: This information is not available centrally.

NHS Trusts

Mr. Milburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what has been the remuneration paid to NHS trust chairs and non-executive directors in each region in 1995–96. [29402]

Mr. Malone: All non-executive directors of national health service trusts are entitled to remuneration of £5,000 per year. National health service trust chairmen are remunerated in one of three bands. These bands, which have not been increased since 1991, are currently:

Band 1: £19,285

Band 2: £17,145

Band 3: £15,125

A list of those appointed to national health service authorities and trusts as at 1 April 1996, together with their remuneration details, will be published in the summer and copies will be placed in the Library.

Corticosteroids

Mr. French: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the risks associated with prescribed corticosteroid drugs. [29515]

Mr. Malone: Corticosteroids are authorised for use in the treatment of many serious and life-threatening conditions and have been used for the treatment of children and adults for many years. All medicines have side-effects, and those for corticosteroids are well documented in the product information, which is produced by the manufacturer and authorised by the licensing authority, and in the British National Formulary, which the Department sends free of charge to all doctors. In 1994, the Committee on Safety of Medicines evaluated the association of corticosteroids and severe chickenpox, as a result of which the product information for corticosteroids was revised to strengthen warnings and precautions of use. Doctors and pharmacists were informed of these changes through the CSM's regular bulletin,"Current Problems in Pharmacovigilance."

West Lancashire and Southport and Formby NHS Trusts

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Health who is responsible for taking the decisions about the reconfiguration of the West Lancashire and Southport and Formby NHS trusts. [29161]

Mr. Malone: There have been no decisions to re-configure the West Lancashire and Southport and Formby national health service trusts. Any proposals for the dissolution and merger of trusts would be subject to public consultation, with the final decision being taken by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

Pressure Sores

Mr. Alfred Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 7 May, *Official Report*, column *32*, about statistics in relation to the incidence of pressure sores among NHS hospital patients, if he will give his estimate of the cost of securing the information requested. [29026]

Mr. Bowis: This information could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Private Patients

Mr. Bayley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many private patients were treated in *(a)* NHS pay beds and *(b)* independent sector beds for (i) all acute conditions excluding maternity care, (ii) maternity care, (iii) cataract surgery, (iv) hip replacement surgery and (v) heart surgery in 1989–90 and each year since then. [29019]

Mr. Malone: Information for England for private patients treated in national health service pay beds is shown in the table. Information on private patients treated in independent sector beds is not available centrally.

Finished consultant episodes

	Acute care (excluding maternity)	*Maternity*	*Cataract*	*Hip replacement*	*Heart surgery*
1990–91	66,956	2,089	4,019	1,142	3,217
1991–92	74,629	2,356	4,193	1,267	4,152
1992–93	72,791	2,505	3,906	1,244	4,648
1993–94	81,697	1,934	4,369	1,463	5,253

Note:
Data in the table is grossed. Information for 1989–90 is not available on a comparable basis.
Source:
Hospital Episode System.

Mr. Bayley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the estimated number of admissions to NHS hospitals in England from non-NHS hospitals, nursing homes, health care and residential institutions in 1985–86 and in each year since then. [29020]

Mr. Malone: The relevant information is as follows:

	From local authority care (including residential accommodation and foster care)	*From non-NHS hospitals, nursing homes, health care or residential institutions*
1990–91	4,303	39,766
1991–92	5,031	36,535
1992–93	4,389	32,225
1993–94	4,693	30,408

Note:
Data in the table is grossed. Information for 1989–90 and earlier years is not available on a comparable basis.
Source:
Hospital Episode System.

Fluoridation

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) which *(a)* water authorities and *(b)* water companies have rejected health authorities' requests for fluoridation since 1985 indicating where these have been on (i) non-technical and (ii) technical grounds; [29135]

(2) what estimate he has made of the savings in dental health costs to Sunderland health authority from water fluoridation; [29132]

(3) when his Department last discussed fluoridation of water supplies with *(a)* the NHS Executive, *(b)* the Water Services Association and *(c)* the Water Companies Association; [28990]

(4) if he will give the total number of cases since 1986 of dental fluorosis in each of the district health authorities in the Northern and Yorkshire region indicating which DHA has *(a)* artificial fluoridation and *(b)* natural fluoridation; [29138]

(5) what are the estimated annual projected *(a)* capital and *(b)* revenue costs to Sunderland health authority from water fluoridation; [19133]

(6) what research his Department has *(a)* undertaken and *(b)* commissioned regarding the relationship between the incidence of tooth decay in areas of similar income level which *(a)* have and *(b)* do not have fluoridated water supplies. [29139]

Mr. Malone: Sunderland is naturally a fluoridated area

with 87 per cent. of the population receiving water with a natural fluoride content between 30 per cent. and 70 per cent. of the optimum concentration for dental benefit. There are no revenue or capital costs associated with natural fluoridation at the level found in Sunderland. No estimate has been made of the savings this has made in dental health costs to Sunderland health authority. Studies have shown in general, however, that the incidence of caries can be reduced by as much as a third to a half in fluoridated areas compared with non-fluoridated areas.

A number of studies and surveys have been carried out since 1990 showing the effect of water fluoridation on dental caries in five-year-old children in communities of differing socio-economic groups. These are listed, with the relevant technical references, in the publication "One in a Million" published in 1994 by the British Fluoridation Society and the Public Health Alliance. This publication is available in the Library. Some of the studies have been commissioned by the British Fluoridation Society, which is funded by the Department of Health. The Department has not itself, however, directly undertaken nor commissioned such studies as information is already available. A recent study into the effect of fluoridation and social class on caries experience in five-year-old Newcastle children in 1994 compared with results over the previous 18 years, showed that differences between the fluoridated and non-fluoridated areas were observed in all social class groupings but the greatest difference in the percentage of children with decay experience occurred in social groups IV and V.

Figures on the number of cases of dental fluorosis in each district are not collected. Officials are currently in correspondence with both the Water Services Association and the Water Companies Association about new guidelines to be issued to health authorities on water fluoridation. Since 1985, the English water undertakers which have rejected fluoridation requests by health authorities have been North Western Water, Yorkshire Water and Southern Water. None of these rejections was on technical grounds.

Oral Contraceptives

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 7 March, *Official Report*, column *321*, (1) if he will lists the costs of *(a)* printing and *(b)* distributing the letter of 26 October 1995 attributed to the Family Planning Association; [26247]

(2) what factors led the Medicines Control Agency to fund the letter dated 26 October 1995. [26571]

Mr. Malone *[holding answer 24 April 1996]:* The cost of printing and collating the letter was £36,780.17. The costs relating to postage to relevant health professionals were £54,040.52. The Medicines Control Agency agreed to fund the costs of this letter since there was a clear need to provide health professionals with additional information and guidance on the practical management issues arising from the advice issued by the Committee on Safety of Medicines on the safety of oral contraceptives dated 18 October. The letter was produced jointly by the Faculty of Family Planning and Reproductive Health Care and the Family Planning Association.

Nurses (Work Permits)

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many work permits have been issued to trained nurses from outside the European economic area to work in private sector nursing homes and in NHS hospitals in East Sussex in each year since 1990. [29197]

Mrs. Gillan: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested is not available. Records of the number of work permits issued each year do not identify county or region.

ENVIRONMENT

Fluoridation

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list by *(a)* water authority and *(b)* water company each incident since 1985 which has resulted in an overdose of fluoride entering the water supply. [29134]

Mr. Clappison: There are no records available for the period 1985 to 1989. No incidents have been reported since then.

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what plans he has to renew the code of fluoridation practice. [29136]

Mr. Clappison: My right hon. Friend has no plans to revise this code at present.

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when his Department last discussed fluoridation of water supplies with *(a)* water companies and *(b)* the Water Services Association. [29137]

Mr. Clappison: My officials last discussed fluoridation of drinking water supplies with an individual water company in October 1995, and with the Water Services Association in November 1993.

Surrey Docks

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment by what date he plans to remove the Surrey docks peninsula from designation as part of the London docklands development area; and what procedures apply to this removal. [29199]

Mr. Curry: Our aim is to remove Surrey docks peninsula from the docklands urban development area, and to transfer planning and development control powers to the London borough of Southwark, with effect from 31 December 1996. This accords with the target timetable outlined in my predecessor's letter of 15 February 1994 to the hon. Member.

The procedures are the same as those which applied to the removal of Bermondsey Riverside from the UDA. First, there are comprehensive discussions between the London borough of Southwark and the London Docklands development corporation to bring forward detailed proposals for handling all LDDC's assets and liabilities and for ensuring the on-going regeneration of the area. These discussions are now at an advanced stage for the Surrey docks peninsula and I shall write to the hon. Member as soon as they are concluded.

Subject to the agreement of all parties to the detailed withdrawal proposals, consultations with the London borough of Southwark and LDDC will be undertaken on a draft statutory order under section 134(3A) and (5) of the Local Government Planning and Land Act 1980, as amended by section 179 of the Leasehold Reform, Housing and Urban Development Act 1993. The order will alter the UDA boundary and transfer planning and development control powers.

We expect to lay the order in late November to early December 1996. It is subject to the negative resolution procedure.

Dry-stone Walling

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what assistance his Department provides to encourage the maintenance and building of dry-stone walls. [29145]

Mr. Clappison: The Government provide grant assistance for the restoration and maintenance of dry-stone walls. Until 1 April, the Countryside Commission, one of my Department's countryside agencies, operated the countryside stewardship scheme, which offers grants for the repair and restoration of walls in association with other land management measures. This scheme was transferred to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on 1 April, and my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister announced the introduction of a new stand-alone option for field boundaries including payments for stone walls and banks within stewardship, and that an extra £5 million will be available for new management agreements under the scheme for each of the years 1996–97 and 1997–98. The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food also provides grants for wall restoration under the environmentally sensitive areas scheme.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what steps his Department is taking to encourage local authorities to promote the preservation of dry-stone walling. [29150]

Mr. Clappison: The Government provide grant assistance for the maintenance and improvement of dry-stone walls under the countryside stewardship and environmentally sensitive areas schemes. Both these schemes are open to appropriate applications from local authorities. Some local authorities also take an active part in the promotion of the countryside stewardship scheme to farmers in their areas. This scheme was transferred from the Countryside Commission to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on 1 April, and my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister announced that an extra £5 million will be available for new management agreements under the scheme for each of the years 1996–97 and 1997–98.

Local authorities and national parks have powers themselves to operate local environmental grant schemes, some of which may include assistance for the management of dry-stone walls. Local planning authorities also have planning powers to control the demolition of dry-stone walls in conservation areas.

Freshwater

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what legislation governs (i) a local authority's and (ii) an urban development corporation's responsibilities for the safety, cleanliness and maintenance of freshwater used for recreational purposes. [29198]

Mr. Clappison: The environmental health departments of local authorities can make available data on the quality and any potential health risk of recreational waters, so that the public can decide whether to use them. If there is reason to suspect that there may be a specific health problem concerning the quality of the water it would be for the local environmental health department, in consultation with the consultant in communicable disease control and the director of public health, to decide what action would be appropriate. The powers under which environmental health departments operate are many and varied but, in the main, stem from public health legislation.

Urban development corporations have no specific statutory powers in respect of the question the hon. Member raises. However, for the London Docklands development corporation the London Docklands Development Corporation Act 1994 confers powers on the LDDC for the management and regulation of certain lands and waters within its area.

Passive Smoking

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when he will next meet representatives of the brewing industry to discuss the dangers of passive smoking in licensed premises. [29141]

Mr. Clappison: There are no plans to meet representatives of the brewing industry to discuss the dangers of passive smoking in licensed premises.

The implementation of smoking policies in licensed premises is a matter for the discretion of the manager in line with the Government's continuing voluntary policy, which encourages the implementation of suitable smoking policies in all enclosed public buildings. Guidance on implementing policies is given in the Government's code of practice on smoking in public places, which was published in December 1991. It makes it clear that the Government expect every effort to be made to cater for the interests of the non-smoker.

Local Government Finance

Mr. David Shaw: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if the Government intend to proceed with their plans for a pilot scheme for the challenge funding of English local authorities' capital expenditure. [29684]

Mr. Gummer: The challenge approach has already proved its ability to stimulate new and innovative thinking among local authorities and so generate projects which offer excellent value for taxpayers' money. Our consultation paper of 30 January sought views on whether this approach could be brought to bear more widely on local authority capital spending on work such as highway maintenance, school building projects or house renovation.

The Government have considered carefully the points made by local authorities and others in response to that consultation paper. We have concluded that it is right to proceed with a practical test of how challenge funding of capital spending might work, the benefits it can bring and the possible opportunity costs of the approach. We therefore intend to establish a pilot capital challenge fund to allocate a proportion of total Government support for English local authorities' capital expenditure. The pilot will in particular test whether the challenge approach can:

- foster local choice and local decision making and provide a clear incentive to developing local partnerships;
- give positive encouragement to those local authorities which take a strategic approach to planning capital investment; and
- lift some of the close controls Whitehall exercises over investment decisions.

The scheme that we intend to implement builds on that outlined in our consultation paper. Key elements of the pilot are:

- it will consist of a single bidding round, with bids to be submitted by 23 September this year, which offers support for capital projects over a maximum of three years, beginning in 1997–98. A total of £600 million of planned support for local authority capital spending will be allocated to successful bids over the three years through the capital challenge fund, with £150 million available in 1997–98, £250 million in 1998–99 and £200 million in 1999–2000;
- authorities will be encouraged to seek support for broadly based, innovative projects or programmes which meet a well defined local need and offer particularly good value for money. They will not be required to address specific service-led objectives;
- authorities will be encouraged to submit a single bid encompassing the complete package of projects and programmes for which they seek support from the challenge fund. Where possible, different authorities responsible for different local services within an area should co-operate in deciding priorities and submit joint bids;
- bids must be submitted to Government offices by 23 September 1996. The names of successful bidders will be announced in December 1996;
- the capital challenge fund will be allocated on a regional basis. Indicative regional shares will be published; and
- awards to successful bidders will take the form of supplementary credit approvals (SCAs).

We are today issuing to all local authorities detailed advice on the preparation and submission of bids for support from the capital challenge fund. I have placed copies of this guidance in the Library of the House.

There are, of course, many practical questions about how best the challenge approach should be applied to the full range of local authority capital spending, and a number of authorities have raised important points which need to be addressed. The pilot scheme will give us the opportunity to consider these while maintaining the momentum towards challenge over the three years for which it will run. We will need to evaluate carefully the outcome of this first bidding round and the projects resulting from it before deciding whether to proceed beyond the pilot to a fuller application of challenge principles to the determination of capital allocations.

In parallel with the pilot we will also consider other questions which it does not directly address, but which need to be considered before we decide whether the challenge approach can be taken further. These include the role of some form of assessment of need in the allocation of capital support and how best to ensure authorities can meet their statutory obligations under a challenge regime, and the mechanism for taking into account usable capital receipts. We hope to involve local authority representatives both in the monitoring of the pilot and the additional work we plan to undertake.

I believe the pilot capital challenge scheme will give us a sound basis from which to explore the challenge approach. I hope it will bring greater local choice over spending priorities, better and stronger local partnerships and improved value for money in publicly financed local authority capital expenditure.

River Thames

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list in rank order the approximate mileage of Thames river frontage *(a)* for each constituency abutting the Thames from Teddington to the estuary limits and *(b)* for each London borough and district council authority abutting the Thames from Teddington to the estuary limits. [28344]

Sir Paul Beresford: The approximate length of Thames river frontage (km) for the London boroughs and district councils are, in rank order:

	Length (km)
Thurrock	30.50
Rochester upon Medway	[1]28.00
LB Richmond upon Thames (downstream of Teddington)	21.80
Southend	14.00
LB Greenwich	13.48
LB Tower Hamlets	11.81
Gravesham	[1]11.00
LB Bexley	9.86
LB Hounslow	9.74
Dartford	[1]9.00
LB Newham	8.13
LB Wandsworth	8.13
LB Southwark	7.58
LB Hammersmith and Fulham	7.18
LB Havering	5.61
LB Barking and Dagenham	4.86
LB Westminster	4.37
LB Lambeth	2.95
LB Kensington and Chelsea	2.44
City Corporation	2.21
Castle Point	1.00
LB Lewisham	0.58

[1] To the nearest km.

No information is held for individual constituencies.

Construction Industry

Mr. Gunnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what discussions he has had with representatives of small companies in the construction industry following publication of the provisions of the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Bill; and if he will make a statement. [28375]

Mr. Robert B. Jones: Ministers in the Department of the Environment regularly meet representatives of small firms in the construction industry, and this has continued during the passage of the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Bill.

The Bill offers considerable benefits for small construction firms. If enacted, it will provide a right to refer contractual disputes to adjudication and will ensure that all contracts provide an adequate payment mechanism. It will render ineffective the notorious pay-when-paid and pay-if-paid contract provisions, except in the case of insolvency, and it will give contractors the right to suspend work if they were not getting paid in accordance with the contract. All these objectives have been welcomed by representatives of small construction companies.

Mining Industry (Major Accidents)

Mr. Hardy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how many accidents involving major injury occurred in the mining industry in 1995–96; and what has been the change in the number of accidents involving major injury per man shift since the changes in safety regulations were effected. [29266]

Sir Paul Beresford: This information is not available in the form requested. However the provisional figure for major injuries in coal mines for the period from April 1995 to December 1995 is 126.

Housing Need

Mr. Patrick Thompson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when he will publish the Government's response to the Environment Select Committee's second report of Session 1995–96 on Housing Need (HC 22); and if he will make a statement. [29613]

Mr. Curry: The Government remain committed to responding to housing need and to an open public debate on the issue. I am pleased that the Environment Select Committee has welcomed our publication of estimates of housing need and recognised the importance of a full and open debate. I welcome the Committee's endorsement of the steps we are taking to improve the forecasting and estimates of future housing need.

The response that I am publishing today makes clear the Government's view that our estimate of the number of social lettings required each year is correct. Latest evidence of continued growth in private rented housing and home ownership shows that we are right to provide social housing at the lower end of our range of estimates of 60,000 to 100,000 social housing outputs a year.

Housing is improving and evidence shows that the numbers of people with severe housing problems is falling.

(a) the number of people sleeping rough in central London has fallen from over 1,000 in 1990 to around 270 in 1995;

(b) the number of households living in bed-and-breakfast accommodation has fallen by 66 per cent. since its peak in 1991 to 4,450 in 1995;

(c) the number of households in overcrowded conditions is around 3 per cent. of all households, compared with 5 per cent. in 1981.

We are getting ahead, not falling behind, in meeting the need for new homes. We will continue to take a balanced approach, promoting sustainable home ownership, encouraging growth in the private rented sector, and investing in social housing. Provisions in the housing Bill currently before Parliament will help us meet need more effectively—for example by ensuring that social housing is allocated fairly.

The private sector has a significant role to play in meeting housing need and can offer a variety of housing options, especially to meet the needs and preferences of older people. The quality of housing in this sector is improving and the Committee should be reassured that provisions in the housing Bill will substantially improve standards in houses in multiple occupation.

I fully share the Committee's concern that some people who bought homes under the right to buy cannot sell them because potential buyers cannot get mortgages, and my Department has taken measures within the housing Bill to resolve the situation, including reducing leaseholders' charges for major works, and further encouragement to local authorities to guarantee loans. Discussions also continue to be held with lenders to encourage a more flexible approach.

I am encouraged that the Committee's report also recognises the contribution of the planning system in assisting the delivery of affordable housing. The Government will continue to consider ways to improve planning guidance.

Recycling Projects (Funding)

Mr. Butler: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment which local authorities will receive supplementary credit approval resources for recycling projects in 1996–97; and if he will make a statement. [29727]

Mr. Clappison: I am today announcing the allocation of over £10 million in supplementary credit approval resources for investment in recycling projects by local authorities in 1996–97. This is the sixth year of the programme and the allocations announced today bring the total number of recycling projects supported by the programme to over 1,300.

The programme forms part of the Government's environmental partnership initiative, which aims to maximise investment through a combination of Government resources, authorities' own resources and private sector contributions. This year we received bids totalling almost £40 million. We have given priority in allocating resources to large-scale projects of strategic significance, aimed at delivering the objectives set out in our White Paper, "Making Waste Work: a strategy for sustainable waste management in England and Wales". If recycling infrastructure is to expand and recycling increase, all those involved in dealing with waste, including Government, local authorities and the private and voluntary sectors, need to work together. Partnership and co-operation are at the heart of our strategy for more sustainable waste management.

Authorities working in co-operation with the private and voluntary sectors have therefore done particularly well in the allocations. The programme also provides the opportunity for authorities to work with the private sector to respond to our producer responsibility challenge for packaging. A number of bids are the result of partnerships between industry and local authorities and are aimed at recycling packaging. A variety of schemes have been successful, including a new materials reclamation facility

at Peterborough, a municipal composting facility to be run jointly by Sandwell and Dudley metropolitan borough councils and a kerbside collection scheme in Amber valley.

One of the features of the SCA programme has been to provide assistance to projects which although environmentally beneficial may not attract support from the private sector. Home composting is a good example of this. We see composting as an important way in which the environmental impact of household waste can be reduced, as well as providing a valuable alternative to peat-based products.

In our waste strategy, "Making Waste Work", we have set a target of 40 per cent. of domestic properties with a garden to carry out home composting by the year 2000. I am therefore pleased that so many authorities are enabling householders to taking increased responsibility for their own waste, by establishing home composting schemes, and I am happy to announce support for home composting which totals £1.1 million.

Each authority is today being notified of the outcome of its bid. Lists of the allocations have been placed in the Library.

Housing Bodies

Sir Sydney Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how he intends to implement the proposals in the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Bill for the establishment of a residuary body to deal with those assets, rights and liabilities remaining when the Commission for the New Towns, the urban development corporations and the housing action trusts are wound up. [29728]

Mr. Curry: Powers to establish such a residuary body are included in the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Bill. Subject to parliamentary approval of these powers, our intention is to base the new body on the Commission for the New Towns. The reformed body will be a small organisation with clearly defined targets and a limited life. It will concentrate on the disposal of the remaining new town land holdings and other assets at a rate consistent with maximising receipts by achieving full open market values, while also disengaging from the remaining liabilities.

We will discuss with CNT the details of the new arrangements. We need to look carefully at a number of issues including the implications of transferring staff and the extent to which the reformed body should carry forward the powers currently enjoyed by the commission. We will also consult other relevant parties on the detailed arrangements, including the bodies to be wound up, the local authority associations and those representing the interests of affected employees.

When my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment announced on 27 July 1993, *Official Report*, column *896*, that it was our intention to wind up CNT in its current form by March 1998, he said that provision would need to be made for the longer-term management and sale of those new town assets which it would not be prudent to dispose of within that time-scale and for the continuing management of any remaining liabilities. Since then, the commission has made considerable progress in disposing of its assets for their full market value and in disengaging from a wide range of liabilities, on which both the board and officials are to be congratulated. We therefore now believe that it would make sense to build on their expertise and experience in order to maximise the returns to the Exchequer on the land holdings which will remain to be disposed of after 1998. In addition, although we expected each individual urban development corporation and housing action trust to dispose of its assets and liabilities before wind up, the reformed body will be able to take on any remaining responsibilities for which no other successor can be identified.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Energy Prices

8. **Mr. Jenkin:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what has been the movement in energy prices for *(a)* industry and *(b)* the domestic consumer since the privatisation of the electricity industry. [28363]

Mr. Page: Between electricity privatisation in 1990 and the last quarter of 1995 electricity prices, in real terms, fell by 10.5 per cent. for industrial consumers and by 7.5 per cent., excluding VAT, for domestic consumers.

Export Markets

13. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what measures the Government plan in order to encourage small businesses to develop export markets. [28368]

Mr. Page: Through the Overseas Trade Services Organisation, my Department now provides its best ever package of information, advice and practical assistance to British companies. Small businesses can take advantage of this support through business links.

Nuclear Industry (Privatisation)

21. **Mr. Alan W. Williams:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what has been the cost to his Department to date of the privatisation of the nuclear industry. [28378]

Mr. Lang: The Department of Trade and Industry had provision for expenditure of £25 million in the year 1995–96. Provisional expenditure figures will be published in July in the public expenditure outturn White Paper. Actual expenditure will be reported to Parliament through the appropriation account.

Manufacturing Output

24. **Mr. Turner:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what has been the growth in manufacturing output in the last three months. [28383]

Mr. Oppenheim: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Edinburgh, Leith (Mr. Chisholm) earlier today.

Mr. Pike: To ask the President of the Board of Trade in which regions of England there has been a decline in manufacturing output since 1979. [28358]

Mr. Lang: The information requested is not available. Overall, manufacturing output has risen by 12 per cent. since 1979. The latest CBI regional trend survey shows manufacturers are expecting strong output growth in all regions.

Visible Trade Deficit

26. **Mr. Hutton:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on trends in the visible trade deficit in the last six months for which figures are available. [28385]

Mr. Nelson: The visible trade deficit averaged £1.14 billion per month in the six months to February and £1.05 billion per month in the previous six months.

Insurance Companies

27. **Mr. French:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what consultation he has had with European Trade Ministers on the prudential supervision of insurance companies. [28386]

Mr. Nelson: There has been no need for discussions at ministerial level in the recent past. However, my officials regularly meet their European counterparts to discuss these issues, both bilaterally and in EU and other international forums.

Common European Currency

28. **Mr. Livingstone:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment he has made of the consequences of Britain joining a common European currency with a level of investment as a proportion of gross domestic product lower than that of the other participating nations. [28387]

Mr. Lang: We will agree to take part in a single currency only if it is in our national interest to do so, given the circumstances at the time. A full assessment of the benefits and disadvantages will be carried out nearer the time, before the decision is made.

Since 1979 business investment in the United Kingdom has risen by over a third and has been a greater share of GDP than in the other major EU countries.

Business Failures

29. **Mrs. Bridget Prentice:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many business failures there were in the first quarter of 1996. [28389]

Mr. Oppenheim: In the first quarter of 1996 there were, on a seasonally adjusted basis, 1,273 compulsory liquidations, 2,022 creditors' voluntary liquidations and 5,333 bankruptcy orders.

Gas Suppliers

30. **Mr. Keith Hill:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade what steps he is taking to ensure that the directors of private gas companies which fraudulently missell gas contracts to consumers are investigated by his Department. [28391]

31. **Mr. Etherington:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will ask the Office of Fair Trading to carry out an investigation into complaints received by the Gas Consumer Council about companies which fraudulently attempt to switch customers from British Gas to other suppliers. [28392]

Mr. John M. Taylor: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Devonport (Mr. Jamieson) earlier today.

Manufacturing Industry

32. **Mr. Pearson:** To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will publish his memorandum to the Treasury on future trends within manufacturing industry. [28393]

Mr. Lang: No.

Mr. Touhig: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will publish his memorandum to the Treasury on future trends within manufacturing industry. [28381]

Mr. Lang: No.

Child Labour

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what discussions he has had concerning restrictions on the importation of goods produced by child labour; and if he will make a statement. [28382]

Mr. Nelson: The Government deplore any exploitation of children and press all countries which have signed labour conventions to meet their obligations. We believe improvements in labour standards are more likely to result from economic growth through trade than by unilateral trade restrictions.

Mortality Study

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade on what date the report, "Mortality Study of Workers at a Patent Fuel Plant"—Institute of Occupational Medicine 1987—was received by his Department; what was the date of publication; and what action was taken in light of the report's findings. [27783]

Mr. Page *[holding answer 2 May 1996]:* I understand that the report, "Mortality Study of Workers at a Patent Fuel Plant," was published in December 1987 by the Institute of Occupational Medicine, an independent research body. Any action taken in light of that report is a matter for British Coal.

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade on what date the report "Toxicity Review 28, Cancer Epidemiology in Coal Tar Pitch Volatile-associated Industries" published in 1993 by the Health and Safety Executive was published; when it was received by his Department and what action was taken in light of the report's conclusion in respect of the risk of cancers in coke oven workers. [27785]

Mr. Page *[holding answer 2 May 1996]:* I understand that the report, "Toxicity Review 28", was published by the Health and Safety Executive on 14 April 1993. Any action taken in light of the report is a matter for the Health and Safety Executive and Commission.

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what action Her Majesty's Government have taken in respect of the analysis of mortality rates by occupation

in the Registrar General's occupational health decennial supplement in respect of lung cancer incidence in the occupational group labourers in coke ovens. [27715]

Mr. Page: Action taken in light of the Registrar General's occupational health decennial supplement is principally a matter for employers.

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when trade unions were informed following the publication of the 1987 "Mortality Study of Workers at the Patent Fuel Plant in the Cynon Valley"; what action was taken consequently by *(a)* management and *(b)* the unions; and what consultations took place into (i) the management and (ii) the unions involved in the industry following the "Toxicity Review 28, Cancer Epidemiology in Coal Tar Pitch Volatile-associated Industries" in 1992. [27796]

Mr. Page *[holding answer 2 May 1996]:* Matters relating to the 1987 "Mortality Study of Workers at a Patent Fuel Plant" are for British Coal. Matters relating to the report, "Toxicity Review 28" are for the Health and Safety Executive and the employers concerned.

Deregulation

Dr. Goodson-Wickes: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what progress he has to report on the deregulation initiative as it affects his Department.[28369]

Mr. Oppenheim: The deregulation initiative is making good progress in my Department. For example, we have laid six deregulation orders to date, and are pursuing radical improvements to the business environment through the Arbitration Bill, which, as the hon. Member will know, is before the House for consideration.

Gas Industry

Mr. Harry Greenway: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when he last met the Director General of Gas Supply to discuss the future of that industry; and if he will make a statement. [28559]

Mr. Eggar: My right hon. Friend has not met the Director General of Gas Supply since becoming President of the Board of Trade. However, I last met her on 17 January. I am very pleased with the way competition is developing as are those consumers in the south-west now buying cheaper gas.

Aerospace Industry

Mr. Ingram: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment he has made of the collaborative arrangement on the development of an engine for the new generation of super-jumbo aircraft between General Electric and Pratt and Whitney on the United Kingdom aero-engine manufacturing sector; and if he will make a statement. [29408]

Mr. Eggar: My officials have had preliminary discussions with Rolls-Royce. I shall continue to monitor the situation.

Mr. Ingram: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what representations he has received from the Society of British Aerospace Companies on the United Kingdom aerospace industry; and if he will make a statement. [29407]

Mr. Eggar: My Department and the Society of British Aerospace Companies issued a joint statement on 29 November 1995 outlining specific ways in which the Government can assist the aerospace industry and maintain an active dialogue on the key issues for the continuing success of this important industry.

Research Councils

Mr. Ingram: To ask the President of the Board of Trade, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Linlithgow of 7 May, *Official Report*, column *45*, from which existing budget the additional sums allocated to the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council came. [29489]

Mr. Lang: The additional sums allocated to the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council for international subscriptions came from the science budget. Details are provided in the booklet, "Allocation of the Science Budget 1996–97", a copy of which is available in the Library of the House.

Financial Assistance

Mr. Jamieson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade, pursuant to his answer of 29 April, *Official Report*, column *363*, if he will state, with reference to the register of personal financial interests of members of his Department's regional industrial development boards and external advisers, *(a)* its location, *(b)* the information that is required to be declared, *(c)* if it is a single document and *(d)* if the declarations of financial interest are mandatory. [28299]

Mr. Oppenheim *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* Details of regional industrial development board members financial interests are held on registered files in the appropriate Government offices. The declaration of interests is a mandatory requirement for appointment. The files are not available for public scrutiny to maintain legitimate personal and commercial confidentiality.

Details of financial interests of external advisers, which are being collected in response to the recommendations of the internal report on ROM Data, are maintained on the same basis as for members of regional boards.

Bomb Bags

Ms Jowell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what representations he has received concerning the banning of bomb bags; and if he will make a statement. [29406]

Mr. John M. Taylor: My Department has received four written and three oral representations about the safety of bomb bags and the nuisance which they can cause. The safety of toys such as bomb bags is controlled by the Toys (Safety) Regulations 1995, which specify safety requirements which all toys must meet. Day-to-day enforcement of the regulations is the responsibility of local authority trading standards officers who have the necessary powers to remove products from the market if they consider them to be unsafe. My Department has ensured that trading standards departments are aware of the issues raised by these products.

Arms Exports

Mr. Mullin: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans he has to review the export credit arrangements for arms sales; and if he will make a statement. [28390]

Mr. Nelson: None.

ECGD's role is to encourage United Kingdom capital goods and project exports by providing insurance against the risks of not being paid by overseas customers. Whether or not individual arms consignments are allowed to go overseas is a matter for the DTI's export licensing unit. Any exports which need an export licence, but do not have one, are not eligible for ECGD cover. ECGD support for defence and civil business is available on the same basis.

Business Links

Mrs. Roche: To ask the President of the Board of Trade, pursuant to his answer of 7 May, *Official Report,* column *43,* which business links operate as divisions of training and enterprise councils. [29471]

Mr. Page: The following business links operate as divisions of TECs, as at 14 May 1996:

Lincolnshire
Milton Keynes
Oldham
St. Helens
Sunderland
Sussex
Thames Valley
Wolverhampton.

Catering Industry

Mrs. Roche: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many catering firms will be excluded from applying to the loan guarantee scheme from 1 September in each region of Great Britain. [29017]

Mr. Page: Given that eligibility for the loan guarantee scheme depends on factors other than business sector it is not possible to determine how many catering firms will be excluded.

Late Payment

Mrs. Roche: To ask the President of the Board of Trade, pursuant to his answer of 1 May, *Official Report,* column *546,* on what day his Department will be publishing the table of results of all departments and their agencies for 1995–96. [29329]

Mr. Page: The table of results for 1995–96 departmental payment performance is currently being collated and will be published at the earliest possible opportunity before the summer recess of the House.

Oil and Gas Installations (North Sea)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many of the offshore oil and gas industry installations in the United Kingdom sector of the North sea could be disposed of at sea under the present legal provisions; and what is the total weight of these installations in metric tonnes. [29336]

Mr. Page: The Government have made it clear that the decommissioning of offshore installations will be consistent with our international obligations, including the International Maritime Organisation's guidelines and standards for the removal of offshore installations. Application of the IMO guidelines and standards to the UK continental shelf—UKCS—means that shallow water installations in less than 75 m of water will be entirely removed. That represents almost three quarters of all UKCS fixed installations. It is likely that they will be returned to shore. In deeper waters, installations may be partially removed provided that there is at least 55 m of clear water above any remains. Around 60 fixed installations fall in to this category representing a total weight of some 3.3 million tonnes. Decisions on their decommissioning and disposal will be taken on the basis of an assessment of the best practicable environmental option in order to arrive at the appropriate solution in each case.

Sellafield (Safety)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will place in the Library the correspondence on safety at Sellafield between the Minister of State and the executive director of Greenpeace UK. [29328]

Mr. Page: Lord Fraser made clear, in his answer in the other place on 15 April, that it is not for him to place copies of correspondence instigated by a Member of that House in the Library of the House. I have nothing to add to his reply.

Electro-magnetic Comparability Directive

Mr. Timms: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment he has made of the impact on United Kingdom industry of the European Union's electro-magnetic comparability directive; and what advice he has issued since it became enforceable. [28988]

Mr. Lang: The Electromagnetic Compatibility (EMC) Regulations, (Statutory Instrument 1992 No. 2372) implementing directive 89/336/EEC came into force on 1 January 1996. It is too early to assess their impact on industry in the United Kingdom, although an initial compliance cost assessment—CCA—estimated that between 2 and 5 per cent. could be added to design costs, this cost being lower as the proportion of designs which took account of EMC requirements from the outset increased. Manufacturers thus had a period of six years in which to design the necessary protection and immunity requirements into their products. By meeting the harmonised requirements and CE marking their products, manufacturers gain access to markets throughout the European economic area.

It is possible for most manufacturers to self-certify their products against a European harmonised standard. Testing is not mandatory except for apparatus designed for the transmission of radiocommunications. Manufacturers are free to judge for themselves the extent to which testing is necessary. If they decide to conduct minimal tests or none at all, they may need to incur some costs to satisfy the

enforcement authority that the product complies, if called upon to do so in the absence of a test report—but this applies to all firms across the EU.

Following an extensive awareness programme of seminars and publications between 1992 and 1995 my Department set up a telephone advice service at the beginning of this year, when the regulations came fully into force, to help to ensure that electrical and electronic equipment manufacturers had the most up-to-date information and guidance on specific queries relating to the legal, technical and standardisation aspects of the EMC legislation.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

National Lottery Grants (Croydon)

Mr. Congdon: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if she will list for each constituency in Croydon the organisations which have received grants from the national lottery and their amount. [27877]

Mr. Sproat: There have been three awards, totalling £73,900 allocated to projects in Croydon, as follows:

Body	*Announced*	*Recipient*	*Amount* £
NLCB	19 December 1995	Friends of the English Language Scheme	9,400.00
NLCB	19 December 1995	Victim support	19,500.00
NLCB	19 December 1995	Refugee project	45,000.00
			73,900.00

Figures for national lottery awards by constituency are not currently available, but my Department is developing a new lottery database, which will shortly allow for this break-down to be made.

Millennium Celebrations

Mr. Butcher: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage (1) if she will undertake an assessment within the next three months of the risks of the Greenwich millennium celebration not being fully operational within the agreed timetable; and if she will inform the Birmingham National Exhibition Centre of the results of such risk assessment before 1 August; [28045]

(2) what assessment she has made of the prospects for (i) the private sector support for, (ii) the transport infrastructure of and (iii) the environmental restoration of the Greenwich site being in place in sufficient time for the Greenwich site to stage the millennium celebration to begin on 1 January 2000. [28046]

Mr. Sproat: The commission is currently undertaking an assessment of the viability of a millennium exhibition on the site of the Greenwich peninsula. The results are expected to be available in September.

National Lottery (Arts Projects)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans she has to revise the national lottery guidelines in respect of non-capital investment creative arts projects and receiving lottery grants. [28693]

Mr. Sproat: On 1 April, my right hon. Friend announced, *Official Report* columns *69–70,* changes to the policy directions issued under subsections (1) and (2) of section 26 of the National Lottery etc. Act 1993. These changes will allow the Arts Council to make revenue-only lottery awards.

Performing Arts (Coventry)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if she will list the performing arts organisations based in Coventry which have *(a)* requested and *(b)* received grants. [28695]

Mr. Sproat: My Departments's funding of the arts is channelled through the Arts Council of England and regional arts boards. It is for them to decide on the allocation of funding for the arts, taking into account national and regional priorities. For 1995–96 West Midlands Arts provided funding of over £770,000 for the following performing arts organisations in Coventry:

DNA Dance and Music

Coventry St. Vincent and Grenadine Association

University of Warwick

Bare Essential Youth Theatre

Shaskeen Theatre Company

Multi Arts National Ltd.

Saint Michael's Singers

Suits U2 Dance Company

Jazz Coventry

Vulcheva-Jenkins Incident

Coventry University Performing

Theatre Absolute

Arts Alive

Belgrade Theatre, Coventry

Warwick Arts Centre.

In addition national lottery awards of over £99,000 have been made to the following performing arts venues in Coventry:

Coventry CPA Brass Band, towards instrument purchase

Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, towards the purchase of a third theatre space for the Coventry Arts Alive summer festival

A number of performing arts organisations have also received awards under the Government's national heritage arts pairing scheme. For 1995–96, awards of £26,700 were made to the following performing arts organisations in Coventry:

Belgrade Theatre, Coventry

Warwick Arts Centre

Warwick Arts Society.

Women in Sport

Ms Mowlam: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what steps she is taking to encourage more women to take part in sport; and what funding is available to encourage women's participation in sport at every level. [29057]

Mr. Sproat: The Government are keen to improve opportunities for women and girls to participate in sport at all levels. These objectives are pursued through sponsorship of the Sports Council, which received £49.2 million grant in aid in 1995–96. In the same year, the Sports Council awarded £617,000 to women's governing bodies of sport; almost £2 million was provided at a national and regional level for projects exclusively or primarily concerned with the development of sport for girls and women; and a further £7.1 million was provided at a national and regional level for projects which had specific implications for women. Women's sport would also have benefitted from the Sports Council's other programmes.

In its first year of operation, the national lottery provided a huge injection of funds for capital projects aimed at increasing participation and enhancing performance. The changes to the directions that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State recently made will enable the Sports Council to give revenue awards to talented sportswomen.

Official Hospitality

Mr. Tony Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage how much was spent on official hospitality by her Department and all associated agencies in the financial year 1995–96. [28577]

Mr. Sproat *[holding answer 9 May 1996]:* The information is as follows:

Department of National Heritage: £25,563

Historic Royal Palaces Agency: £46,133

Royal Parks Agency: £16,627.

Euro 96 (Tickets)

Miss Hoey: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what assessment she has made of the ticket allocation procedures for Euro 96; what discussions she has had with the football authorities on this matter; what plans she has to meet the organisers of Euro 96; and if she will make a statement. [29326]

Mr. Sproat *[holding answer 14 May 1996]:* The allocation of tickets for Euro 96 has been carried out in accordance with UEFA guidelines, and the Football Association has established procedures for the distribution of tickets to supporters. Last week, it became apparent that a significant number of tickets had not been allocated in accordance with these procedures. Proper segregation of supporters is important for public safety and public order. The FA is working closely with the police and security checks are being made before the tickets concerned are released. I have had a number of meetings with the organisers of Euro 96. I shall continue to monitor developments closely. The eyes of the world will be on us during Euro 96. The FA is well aware that everything must be done to minimise possible disorder and have taken additional precautions in the light of what has emerged.

Orchestras

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage how many orchestras have been awarded funds from the national lottery. [28942]

Mr. Sproat: To date, 23 orchestras have been awarded funds, totalling £5,201,119, from the national lottery.

Employees' Rights

Ms Jowell: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage (1) what provision is available to employees of executive agencies under the control of her Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case; [27605]

(2) what provision is available to employees of her Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home-working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [27604]

Mr. Sproat *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* The following table represents the provisions available in my Department and the two agencies for which the Department is responsible—the Historic Royal Palaces Agency and the Royal Parks Agency.

Employee benefit	*Provision in the department*	*Criteria to judge eligibility*	*Variation if different in the Agencies*
(a) Maternity leave and (b) Maternity pay	14 weeks' paid maternity leave, with up to 38 weeks' additional unpaid maternity leaveGenerally, women must have 1 years' continuous (permanent) employment in the Civil Service		
(c) Paternity leave	2 days taken before or after the baby is born	Male employees	
(d) Parental leave	Generally up to 10 paid days in one leave year, and up to 52 weeks' unpaid leave (in cases of adoption up to 20 days paid leave)Where appropriate, at local management discretionFor Agencies currently no formalised arrangements		

Employee benefit	*Provision in the department*	*Criteria to judge eligibility*	*Variation if different in the Agencies*
(e) Flexible working hours	Agreed departmental policy	Where appropriate, at local management discretion	For RPA open to all staff except in sections where cover is essential eg Personnel, Reception
(f) Part-time working	Agreed departmental policy	Where appropriate, at management discretion	
(g) Job sharing	Agreed departmental policy	Where appropriate, at local management discretion	For Agencies currently no formalised arrangements
(h) Leave to care for sick children	As for 'parental leave'	As for 'parental leave'	For Agencies up to 5 days paid leave; thereafter unpaid leave possible
(i) Homeworking	No formalised scheme, pilot scheme currently being tested	Where appropriate, at local management discetionFor Agencies currently no formalised arrangements	
(j) Term-time contracts	Currently no provision		
(k) Annual hours contracts	Currently no provision		For HRPA two distinct groups of staff work under these contracts to meet the needs of the business/visitors
(l) Workplace nurseries and (m) Childcare allowances	One nursery place for a child up to five years old. In addition a holiday playscheme operates to help staff look after their children in school holidays. DNH provides 50 per cent. subsidy for both nursery and playschemeOpen to all employeesFor Agencies currently no provision		
(n) Carers' leave	As for 'parental leave'	As for 'parental leave'	For Agencies up to 5 days paid leave; thereafter unpaid leave possible
(o) Career break schemes	Up to 5 years unpaid leave to cope with domestic responsibilities	Open to all employees at local management discretion	

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Meat Rendering Industry

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what regulations have been enacted since 1980 which *(a)* deregulate and *(b)* regulate the meat rendering industry. [28103]

Mr. Boswell: Legislation introduced by the Department since 1980 to regulate the rendering industry is as listed. No deregulatory legislation was introduced during this period:

The Diseases of Animals (Protein Processing) Order 1981 (SI No. 1981/676). This order was revoked and replaced by the Processed Animal Protein Order 1989 (SI No. 1989/661).

The Animal By-Products Order 1992 (SI No. 1992/3303)

The Animal By-Products (Amendment) Order 1996 (SI No. 1996/827)

The Animal By-Products (Identification) Regulations 1995 (SI No. 1995/614).

The Specified Bovine Offal Order 1995 (SI No. 1995/1928) and the Specified Bovine Offal (Amendment) Order 1995 (SI No. 1995/3246) were revoked and replaced by the Specified Bovine Material Order 1996 (SI No. 1996/963), which was revoked and replaced by the Specified Bovine Material (No. 2) Order 1996 (SI No. 1996/1192).

Departmental Staff

Mr. David Nicholson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many extra staff *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the agencies for which he is responsible, have employed since 20 March; and what extra staff have been (i) recruited and (ii) deployed from his Department in London to assist regional and local offices in providing information and assistance. [28216]

Mr. Boswell: Core MAFF, ADAS and the Pesticides safety directorate have employed 31 extra staff since 20 March as follows:

Casual Administrative Assistants: 15

Permanent Administrative Assistants: 1

Casual Administrative Officers: 6

Permanent Administrative Officers: 1

Personal Secretaries: 1

Recruitment Agency Staff: 7

Of these, 30 members of staff were recruited by regional or local offices.

Eight members of staff have been deployed from London to our offices in Tolworth as follows:

Grade 7s: 2

Higher Executive Officers: 2

Executive Officers: 4

Chief executives of other agencies will reply separately.

Letter from P. I. Stanley to Mr. David Nicholson, dated 15 May 1966:

STAFF EMPLOYED SINCE 20 MARCH

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has asked me to reply to your question about staff employed since 20 March in respect of his Central Science Laboratory (CSL) Agency, as this is an operational matter for which I am responsible. (28216)

Since the date in question CSL has taken on some 54 staff. This includes 15 casual or fixed-term appointees and 33 Regional Bee Inspectors who are employed on short-term contracts to carry out work of a seasonal nature.

Letter from Dr. J. M. Rutter to Mr. David Nicholson, dated 15 May 1996:

The Minister has asked me to reply to your question about extra staff employed since 20 March as this is an operational matter for which I am responsible. (28216)

The Veterinary Medicines Directorate has employed 6 extra staff since 20 March. Of these 2 were recruited, 1 transferred from core-MAFF, 2 transferred from the Central Science Laboratory and 1 is on loan from the Department of Health.

Letter from George Trevelyan to Mr. David Nicholson, dated 15 May 1996:

I am replying to your Question to the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food about the number of additional staff employed by this Agency since 20 March 1996 as this is a matter that falls within my administrative responsibility. (28216)

Since 20 March this year, this Agency has recruited and appointed 54 new staff, ranging from the Higher Executive Officer grade to Clerical and Support Grade staff. Of these, 33 of the new staff have been deployed to help other existing staff working on BSE schemes or additional work arising from the recent announcements about BSE. Some of the other new recruits have been posted to other parts of the Agency in order that a further 10 more experienced permanent staff can be re-deployed to BSE related duties.

The Agency is based in Reading and Newcastle and as the majority of our new staff requirements have been in the non-mobile clerical grades, no additional staff have been deployed from London or from other locations.

Letter from T. W. A. Little to Mr. David Nicholson, dated 15 May 1996:

The Minister has asked me to reply to your question on staff recruited since 20 March in the Veterinary Laboratories Agency since 20 March 1996.

13 staff have been recruited and have filled existing vacancies in the Agency.

Letter from Johnston O'Neill to Mr. David Nicholson, dated 15 May 1996:

As Chief Executive of the Meat Hygiene Service, your question to the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food concerning the employment of extra staff since 20 March has been passed for me for reply with respect to this Executive Agency. (28216)

The Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) was launched on 1 April 1996 as an Executive Agency of MAFF. It took over from some 300 local authorities responsibility for enforcement of the hygiene and welfare at slaughter legislation in licensed fresh meat premises in England, Scotland and Wales.

The MHS is responsible for enforcing the enhanced specified bovine offal (SBO), now termed specified bovine material (SBM) controls recommended by the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee. These controls are central to the protection of public health from any risk of BSE. They require the removal of all those tissues known to potentially harbour BSE infectivity from all cattle at slaughter. Compliance with these controls is of paramount importance

To ensure the rigorous enforcement of SBM controls the MHS has recruited 47 additional Meat Inspectors (MIs) and 1 Official Veterinary Surgeon (OVS). The MHS has also developed a new concept of "meat technician" to provide back up support to MIs and OVSs and to give additional public assurance that SBM controls are comprehensively enforced. These individuals are required to hold appropriate relevant qualifications, e.g. from the Institute of Meat or have extensive practical experience in the meat trade. 52 meat technicians have now been recruited, 32 of whom are currently on a training course developed by the MHS in conjunction with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, University College Salford, the Royal Society of Health.

The working hours of existing MHS staff have also been increased to ensure the strict enforcement of the controls. 31 casual Meat Inspectors have so far been upgraded to full time inspectors. In addition other staff continue to be redeployed to SBM control functions.

Training on SBM controls is also being provided to all meat inspection staff. To assist in this exercise, the MHS has drawn up a guidance pack and a comprehensive set of slides on SBM controls.

Civil Servants

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which of the companies in which civil servants in his Department are directors have given money to political parties in the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [29251]

Mr. Boswell: Details of contributions to political parties by companies are given in companies' accounts. Whether a particular company has or has not made a contribution to any political party is not taken into account when deciding whether appointments are suitable.

Mr. Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make it his policy to ensure that civil servants from his Department who sit on the boards of food and agricultural companies are removed from official duties in areas of work in which those companies have a trading interest; and if he will make a statement. [29255]

Mr. Boswell: The position of staff holding non-executive directorships or similar appointments is safeguarded by the general requirement binding on all civil servants that they must not take part in activities which might conflict with the interests of their Department, or impair their usefulness as public servants, or be inconsistent with their position as such.

Civil servants acting as directors remain subject to the Official Secrets Acts and the need to preserve the confidentiality of departmental business and information received in confidence from others. In relation to any particular appointment, individuals and their line managers must consider whether there is a present or potential conflict of interest, including whether their duties are in areas of work in which the company has a trading interest. If appropriate, an appointment may not be proceeded with, or restrictions may be placed on the kinds of discussion that the individual can take part in.

Mr. Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what costs his Department has paid in respect of liabilities incurred by civil servants or directors of companies; and if he will make a statement. [29250]

Mr. Boswell: I am not aware of any departmental civil servant holding a non-executive directorship or non-executive appointment being subject to legal

proceedings or threatened legal proceedings in respect of his or her non-executive role; or of any other liability on behalf of civil servants or directors.

It was agreed in 1991 to allow Departments to indemnify civil servants in non-executive roles because the civil liabilities associated with such appointments might have deterred civil servants from taking up these opportunities.

Agricultural Systems

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on the comparative costing of *(a)* organic, *(b)* bio-dynamic, *(c)* permaculture and *(d)* conventional intensive agricultural systems where the external costs have been internalised; if he will list the results of that research; and if he will make a statement. [29253]

(2) what research on permaculture has been *(a)* evaluated and *(b)* commissioned by his Department; what plans it has to evaluate or commission such research in the near future; and if he will make a statement. [29254]

Mr. Boswell: We fund a wide range of research into the environmental aspects of conventional farming, to support our aim of protecting and enhancing the environment. We also have an organic research programme which so far has concentrated on evaluating the agronomic and economic performance of that system. As yet, no research has been commissioned of the specific type noted in these questions.

Comparative work in this area is inherently difficult and subjective, not least because it requires a precise definition of the systems being compared, identification of the various cost factors, and a reliable technique for their valuation. We are considering a study of these methodological issues, in relation to a comparison of organic and conventional farming. Bio-dynamic agriculture is regarded as a form of organic farming, but we do not have a specific policy or research effort in relation to permaculture.

Dry-stone Walling

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what help his Department provides to encourage the maintenance and building of dry-stone walls. [29146]

Mr. Boswell: Grants for the restoration of dry-stone walls are available in those environmentally sensitive areas in which walls are a particular feature, as well as under the countryside stewardship scheme which applies throughout England outside ESAs.

Chocolate Directive

Mr. Bayley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 29 January, *Official Report*, column *523*, what assessment he has made as to whether the European Commission proposals to replace the 1973 cocoa and chocolate products directive will adequately *(a)* protect the diversity of chocolate recipes which may be marketed within the European Community and *(b)* safeguard the use of the name chocolate on products containing mixtures of vegetable fats currently marketed throughout the European Community; and what is his policy on the Commission's new draft directive on this matter. [29025]

Mrs. Browning: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to the hon. Member for Swindon (Mr. Coombs) on 24 April 1996, *Official Report*, column *212*.

We have not yet seen the formal text of the proposals for the new cocoa and chocolate directive. I sympathise with the points made by the hon. Member and can assure him that we shall seek to protect the legitimate interests of United Kingdom consumers and manufacturers during negotiations.

Wildlife Bill

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what briefing his Department provided to hon. Members for the Committee stage of the Wildlife Bill. [29267]

Mr. Boswell: None.

Employees' Rights

Ms Jowell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what provision is available to employees of executive agencies under the control of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home working, *(j)* term-time contracts, *(k)* annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [27593]

Mr. Boswell *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* Responsibility for these matters is delegated to agency chief executives and I have asked them to reply to the hon. Member direct.

Letter from T. W. A. Little to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 15 May 1996:

The Minister has asked me to reply to your PQ on provisions available to employees of the Veterinary Laboratories Agency (VLA).

The VLA was established on 1 October 1995, from the merger of the existing Central Veterinary Laboratory with the Veterinary Investigation Service, which was part of the State Veterinary Service.

The availability of the provisions you mention are set out in a MAFF Staff Handbook to which all employees in this Agency have access. They apply to both full-time and part-time staff. Maternity arrangements are provided in conjunction with the statutory entitlements available. Where provision in the Agency differs from that of MAFF, information is readily available, for example on the Holiday Playscheme.

Letter from G. K. Bruce to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 15 May 1996:

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has asked me to reply to your question about the provision available to employees for maternity leave and various other allowances and schemes in respect of the Pesticides Safety Directorate (PSD), as this is an operational matter for which I am responsible.

PSD currently follows the provisions allowed for by MAFF policies.

Letter from J. M. Rutter, to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 15 May 1996:

The Minister has asked me to reply to your question about the provision of (a) maternity leave, (b) maternity pay, (c) paternity leave, (d) parental leave, (e) flexible working hours, (f) part time work, (g) job sharing, (h) leave to care for sick children, (i) home-working, (j) term-time contracts, (k) annual hours contracts, (l) workplace nurseries, (m) childcare allowances, (n) carers' leave and (o) career break schemes for staff in the Veterinary Medicines Directorate as this is an area for which I am responsible.

The availability of these provisions is set out in a Staff Handbook to which all employees in Veterinary Medicines Directorate have easy access. They apply to both full-time and part-time staff. Maternity arrangements are provided in conjunction with the statutory entitlements available.

There is an on-site Playscheme for 5-12 year olds which is provided during the main school holidays by the Veterinary Laboratories Agency, with whom we share the site. There is no provision for under 5 year olds.

Letter from Phillip Needham to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 15 May 1996:

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has asked me to reply direct to your Parliamentary Question in which you ask what provision is available to employees of Executive Agencies for (a) maternity leave, (b) maternity pay, (c) paternity leave, (d) parental leave, (e) flexible working hours, (f) part-time work, (g) job sharing, (h) leave to care for sick children, (i) home-working, (j) term-time contracts, (k) annual hours contracts, (l) workplace nurseries, (m) childcare allowances, (n) careers' leave and (o) career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case.

ADAS follows the provisions as set out in the MAFF Staff Handbook to which all employees in ADAS have access. They apply to both full-time and part-time staff. Maternity arrangements are provided in conjunction with the statutory entitlements available.

Letter from Johnston McNeill to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 15 May 1996:

As Chief Executive of the Meat Hygiene Service, your question to the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food concerning various personnel policies has been passed to me for reply with respect to this Executive Agency.

The Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) was launched on 1 April 1996 as an Executive Agency of MAFF. It took over from some 300 local authorities responsibility for enforcement of the hygiene and welfare at slaughter legislation in licensed fresh meat premises in England, Scotland and Wales.

The MHS has developed, consulted on, and negotiated the agreement on a comprehensive set of personnel policies covering a number of these areas, specifically a), b), c) and k). The MHS however must develop policies relevant to the nature of its business environment. On a full cost recovery basis the MHS provides statutory meat inspection and official veterinary services in approximately 1,800 licensed meat plants, cold stores and cutting rooms dispersed throughout England, Scotland and Wales. Employees operate in teams ranging in size from lone workers to a team size of approximately ten. The MHS seeks to provide a cost effective and responsive service to Industry at all times. Specific policies provide for the following:

(i) The MHS maternity leave and payment arrangements apply to all pregnant employees regardless of the number of hours worked per week. To qualify for maternity leave, an MHS employee should write to their Regional Manager or Head of Department at least twenty one days before maternity leave is intended to begin or as soon as is reasonably practicable, confirming pregnancy and the expected week of confinement (EWC). Employees should state the date of the beginning of maternity absence and whether or not they intend to return to work. Maternity leave may not commence earlier than 11 weeks before the EWC. Employees who have 1 or more years' continuous service, are entitled to 18 weeks' leave of absence and may remain absent for up to 29 weeks from the beginning of the week in which confinement occurs. Employees who have less than 1 year's continuous service are entitled to up to 18 weeks' absence. Any employee returning to work after pregnancy may do so under the original contract of employment and on terms and conditions no less favourable than that which would have applied if there had been no maternity leave.

(ii) Employees who have one or more years' continuous service receive maternity pay of 90 per cent. of full pay for the first six weeks and 50 per cent. of full pay and State Maternity Pay for the following 12 weeks. Employees with less than one year's service, casual employees and those with a fixed term contract of less than 2 years receive Statutory Maternity Pay or Maternity Pay.

(iii) Maternity Support Leave (paternity leave) of 5 days with pay will be granted to the child's father or the partner or nominated carer of an expectant mother at or around the time of birth. A nominated carer is the person nominated by the mother to assist in the care of the child and to provide support to the mother at or around the time of the birth. Employees applying for maternity support leave must provide a copy of the mother's maternity certificate.

(iv) Industry requirements for MHS services vary tremendously based on seasonal factors, consumer demand, etc. Accordingly employees operate principally on a 37 hour/5 day week. This is however supplemented by conditional/contractual overtime schemes, a variety of shift systems and in some cases a scheme of annualised hours where significant seasonal demand patterns exist, typically in lamb production. The particular scheme involves employees based at seasonal plants, or servicing a number of plants, working a longer working week of conditioned hours at certain times of the year and a correspondingly shorter working week at other times of the year. The particular scheme in question will be discussed with Industry representatives.

Given the practical demands of the environment in which the majority of MHS operate it does not have any specific policy on parental leave, leave to care for sick children or carer's leave. However, consideration would be given for these purposes under the MHS special leave scheme. No provision is available for homeworking, term time contracts, flexible working hours, childcare allowances, part-time working or career break schemes. Sympathetic consideration would be given to some of the above if appropriate.

Letters from P. I. Stanley to Ms Tessa Jowell, dated 15 May 1996:

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has asked me to reply to your question about the provision available to employees for maternity leave and various other allowances and schemes in respect of his Central Science Laboratory (CSL) Agency, as this is an operational matter for which I am responsible.

CSL has not as yet developed specific policies in the areas that you have referred to and is currently following the provisions allowed for by MAFF policies.

Ms Jowell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what provision is available to employees of his Department for *(a)* maternity leave, *(b)* maternity pay, *(c)* paternity leave, *(d)* parental leave, *(e)* flexible working hours, *(f)* part-time work, *(g)* job sharing, *(h)* leave to care for sick children, *(i)* home working, *(j)* term-time contracts, (k) annual hours contracts, *(l)* workplace nurseries, *(m)* child care allowances, *(n)* carers' leave and *(o)* career break schemes; and what criteria are used to judge eligibility in each case. [27592]

Mr. Boswell *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* The availability of these provisions is set out in a staff handbook to which all employees in this Department have easy access. They apply to both full-time and part-time staff. Maternity arrangements are provided in conjunction with the statutory entitlements available.

Bovine Tuberculosis

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what further research is being carried out to establish whether bovine TB in cattle is infective at any stage of the disease in the absence of gross visible lesion tubercles. [29261]

Mrs. Browning *[holding answer 14 May 1996]:* None in this country at present.

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list by county the number of dairy herds which reported outbreaks of bovine TB in 1995, or the latest year for which figures are available, the approximate number of cases in each herd, and whether each was a first or repeat outbreak. [29262]

Mrs. Browning *[holding answer 14 May 1996]:* The information is not available in the form requested and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. However, there were 446 new confirmed herd breakdowns in Great Britain in 1995. The approximate number of cases in each herd is four.

Official Hospitality

Mr. Tony Banks: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much was spent on official hospitality by his Department and all associated agencies in the financial year 1995–96. [28573]

Mr. Boswell *[holding answer 9 May 1996]:* The amount spent by the Minstry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food excluding its agencies on hospitality in the financial year 1995–96 was £59,646.25.

Chief executives of the agencies will reply separately.

Letter from T. W. A. Little to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 15 May 1996:

The Minister has asked me to reply to your question on expenditure on official hospitality over 1995–96 in the Veterinary Laboratories Agency (VLA).

The VLA was established on 1 October 1995, from the merger of the existing Central Veterinary Laboratory with the Veterinary Investigation Service, which was part of the State Veterinary Service. This information therefore includes spending from October 1995 to March 1996 by the former VI Service.

Expenditure on official hospitality in the VLA in the financial year 1995/96 was £18,900.

Letter from J. M. Rutter to Tony Banks, dated 15 May 1996:

The Minister has asked me to reply to your question (No. 28573) about expenditure on hospitality by the Veterinary Medicines Directorate for 1995/96, as this is an operational matter for which I am responsible.

The expenditure on hospitality, which principally covers working lunches for industry liaison meetings, for 1995/96 was £122.70.

Letter from Johnston McNeil to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 15 May 1996:

As Chief Executive of the Meat Hygiene Service, your question to the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food concerning official hospitality has been passed to me for reply with regard to this Executive Agency.

£5,750 was spent on hospitality by the Meat Hygiene Service during the financial year 1995/96.

Letter from Phillip Needham to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 15 May 1996:

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has asked me to reply to your Parliamentary question in which you asked how much was spent on official hospitality by his department and all associated agencies in the year 1995/96.

The costs incurred by ADAS on official hospitality in 1995/96 were £10,630.

Letter from G. K. Bruce to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 15 May 1996:

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has asked me to reply, in respect of the Pesticides Safety Directorate (PSD), to your question concerning hospitality.

The sum of £1,269 has been spent on official hospitality during 1995/96.

Letter from P. I. Stanley to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 15 May 1996:

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has asked me to reply to your question about expenditure on hospitality in the financial year 1995/96 in respect of his Central Science Laboratory (CSL) Agency, as this is an operational matter for which I am responsible.

Expenditure for the year in question is expected to be £21.3K. Final figures are not yet available but any variation to this estimate will be very small.

Letter from George Trevelyan to Mr. Tony Banks, dated 15 May 1996:

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has asked me to reply to your Question about the amounts spent of official hospitality by the Intervention Board in 1995–1996 as the matter is one within my operational responsibility.

In 1995–1996 the cost of hospitality, which is included in the running cost of the Agency, was £2,522.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 16 May 1996

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Tribunals

Dr. Wright: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list those tribunals whose members *(a)* receive and *(b)* do not receive payments and allowances; and if he will set out the payments and allowances for each tribunal. [28691]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: The tribunals for which the Lord Chancellor is responsible whose members *(a)* receive payments and allowances are:

(i) the Immigration Appeal Tribunal

(ii) the Lands Tribunal

(iii) the Pensions Appeal Tribunal

(iv) the Transport Tribunal

(v) the VAT and Duties Tribunal.

The salary of the president of the Immigration Appeal Tribunal is £79,978; the salary of full-time members is £75,978; the daily sitting fee of part-time legal members is £282; the daily sitting fee of part-time lay members is £130.

The salary of the president of the Lands Tribunal is £79,978; the salary of full-time members is £75,978; the daily sitting fee of part-time members is £345.

The salary of the part-time president of the Pensions Appeal Tribunal is £26,407.20; the daily sitting fee of part-time legal chairmen is £282; the daily sitting fee of part-time medical members is £300; the daily sitting fee of part-time lay members is £130.

The daily sitting fee of part-time legal members of the Transport Tribunal is £254 and of part-time lay members is £203.

The salary of the president of the VAT and Duties Tribunal and presiding special commissioner of income tax—a combined post—is £88,266; the salary of the vice president is £66,018; the salary of chairmen is £62,018; the daily sitting fee of part-time chairmen is £282; the daily sitting fee of part-time lay members is £162.

All full-time members of the judiciary who receive a salary of £62,018 or £66,018 and who are in receipt of the £2,000 London allowance also receive a salary lead of £2,000 per annum over their colleagues outside London.

Allowances for each tribunal are:

Subsistence (day):

daily, over five hours: £4.25

daily, over 10 hours: £9.30

daily, over 12 hours: £13.55

Subsistence (overnight):

up to £65.16 (London)

up to £62.40 (elsewhere)

personal incidental expenditure £5 per night

Travelling expenses are payable. These are the actual cost of rail, bus, taxi or air travel. Car mileage is paid thus:

Pence

Pence per mile	*Engine to 1500cc*	*1501 to 2000cc*	*over 2000 cc*
First 5,000 miles in a year	37.5	42	46
Over 5,000 miles in a year	18	22	30
Public transport rate	23.8	23.8	23.8

(b) There are no tribunals for which the Lord Chancellor is responsible whose members do not receive payments.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

EC Legislation

Mr. Nigel Evans: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will set out the results of the review of guidance on avoiding the over-implementation of EC legislation in UK law. [29976]

Mr. Freeman: The Government's policy is to implement EC legislation in a way that fully meets our legal obligations while imposing the least possible burden on business and others affected.

I am today publishing a new "Implementing European Law" checklist, which will assist Ministers and officials in avoiding any over-implementation of EC legislation. Ministers will certify personally that they have applied the checklist.

I am arranging for copies of the checklist to be placed in the House Library.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Child Support Agency

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what was the total amount of unpaid assessed maintenance owing to the Child Support Agency at 31 March; [29347]

(2) what was the average level of arrears for absent parents at 31 March who had received *(a)* full maintenance assessments and *(b)* interim maintenance assessments. [29348]

Mr. Andrew Mitchell: Administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the chief executive, Miss Ann Chant. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Miss Ann Chant to Mr. Frank Field, dated 15 May 1996:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Questions to the Secretary of State for Social Security about unpaid assessed maintenance.

The total Maintenance Debt as at 31 March 1996 was £895.6m. This includes the debt for both Full Maintenance Assessments estimated at 32% (£286.6m) and Interim Maintenance Assessments estimated at 68% (£609m).

It should be made clear that this is not debt due to the Child Support Agency. Rather it is debt due from absent parents to parents with care some of which will be re-directed to the Secretary of State for Social Security to re-imburse benefit payments previously paid to parents with care.

The average level of arrears in Full Maintenance Assessment cases is not available, nor is it available in Interim Maintenance Assessment cases. This information will be available from the Agency's Debt Management System which will be introduced later this year.

I hope this is helpful.

Mr. Bayley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many applications the Child Support Agency has received for property settlements to be taken into account when calculating maintenance payments; and in how many cases maintenance payments have been reduced to take account of property settlements. [29024]

Mr. Mitchell: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the chief executive, Miss Ann Chant. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Miss Ann Chant to Mr. Hugh Bayley, dated 15 May 1996:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Social Security about Child Support Agency maintenance payments.

The Agency received 11,388 applications in response to mailshots from March 1995, which notified absent parents about property/capital settlements. Of the cases live on the Child Support Computer System prior to April 1995, 3,113 cases have been awarded an allowance in respect of property and capital settlements.

New cases since April 1995, which include consideration of property and capital settlements as part of the maintenance assessment process, have to date resulted in 1,928 successful applications.

I hope this is helpful.

Mr. Bayley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the total administrative cost of running the Child Support Agency in 1995–96; and what was the whole-time equivalent number of staff employed by the agency at *(a)* the start and *(b)* the end of that year. [29023]

Mr. Mitchell: Administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the chief executive, Miss Ann Chant. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Miss Ann Chant to Mr. Hugh Bayley, dated 15 May 1996:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Social Security about Child Support Agency costs and staffing.

The running costs of the Agency for 1995/96 are not yet finalised. The most up to date figure is £197m (subject to end of year adjustment).

The number of whole time equivalent staff employed by the Agency at the start of financial year 1995–96 was 5965.4. The number of whole time equivalent staff employed by the Agency at 31 March 1996 was 6660.0.

I hope this is helpful.

Mr. Bayley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many *(a)* incoming and *(b)* outgoing items of correspondence and telephone calls were recorded by the Child Support Agency in 1995–96. [29021]

Mr. Mitchell: Administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the chief executive, Miss Ann Chant. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Miss Ann Chant to Mr. Hugh Bayley, dated 15 May 1996:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Social Security about Child Support Agency correspondence and telephone calls.

No records are kept of the numbers of either incoming or outgoing items of post. The post handled by the Agency contains not just items of correspondence from clients, but general administration items, internal post and files etc. There is no business need for the Agency to differentiate between the types of post received or sent, nor is there a need to record exact figures.

Similarly, the Agency does not maintain records at all its business locations of every incoming and outgoing telephone call (which would include internal and Departmental calls). Procedures are in place to try to ensure that all calls from the public are dealt with effectively, and all Child Support Agency Centres (CSACs) have Client Helplines that record details of all case-specific calls on the Child Support Computer System. Any telephone enquiry which requires action by another section is passed on with a written referral.

Information is available to show how many calls from the public were answered by the Client Help Line sections in each CSAC and the National Enquiry Line, and is shown on the table attached. This also shows the number of occasions where these sections made calls back to the public to answer the query raised.

I hope this is helpful.

Telephone calls answered and made by the client help line and national enquiry line for the period April 1995 to March 1996

	Number
Incoming calls	1,799,686
Call back to the public	41,962

Child Support Assessments

Mr. Bayley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many child support assessments had been concluded before the 1995–96 financial year; how many were concluded during that year; and how many applications were being processed but had not been concluded at the end of that year. [29022]

Mr. Mitchell: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the chief executive, Miss Ann Chant. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Miss Ann Chant to Mr. Hugh Bayley, dated 15 May 1996:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Social Security about Child Support assessments.

In 1993/94 and 1994/95 financial years a total of 456,278 child support assessments were concluded.

The number concluded for financial year 1995/96 is 127,876.

The number of applications that were being processed but had not been concluded at the end of March 1996 is 409,659.

It may be helpful for you to know that this information is regularly updated and copies are placed in the Library.

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the average full maintenance assessment made by the Child Support Agency. [29349]

Mr. Mitchell: Administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the chief executive, Miss Ann Chant. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Miss Ann Chant to Mr. Frank Field, dated 15 may 1996:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Social Security about Child Support Agency maintenance assessments.

In cases where the absent parent has earned income the average full maintenance assessment is £38.92. When absent parents on benefit are included the average figure is £23.43. These figures are based on a 5% sample of cases as at 30 November 1995.

I hope you find this helpful.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Examination Results

Mr. Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what were the average point scores (A*=7) for *(a)* English language, *(b)* GCSE mathematics and *(c)* both subjects together of each individual 20th group of (i) all 15-year-olds, (ii) boys only and (iii) girls only, when ranked in each case by their average point scores in each of these subjects, indicating the average point score of each group for all GCSE subjects and its average number GCSE entries per pupil in each case, together with the number of pupils in each group for all such pupils (1) in England, (2) in the local education authority maintained sector, (3) in the grant-maintained sector, (4) in the whole maintained sector and (5) in the independent sector for 1992 and 1995. [28607]

Mr. Paice: The data are contained in a number of tables which will be placed in the Library. The tables for 1992 and 1995 show the average point scores (A*=7) for *(a)* GCSE English language, *(b)* GCSE mathematics, *(c)* both subjects and *(d)* all GCSEs together of each group (i) of all 15-year-olds, (ii) boys only and (iii) girls only, when ranked in each case by their average point scores in each of these subjects, indicating the average point score of each group for all GCSE subjects and its average number of GCSE entries per pupil in each case, together with the number of pupils in each group for all such pupils (1) in England, (2) in the local education authority maintained sector, (3) in the grant maintained sector, (4) in the whole maintained sector and (5) in the independent sector. For English and mathematics separately there are eight groups, and for both subjects together there are 15 groups.

Grant-maintained Schools

Mr. Booth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment she has made of the academic performance of children at grant-maintained schools in London. [28967]

Mrs. Gillan: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Mr. Deva) on 20 March, *Official Report*, column *223*.

Smoking

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps she is taking to publicise to children in school the link between smoking and cancer. [29228]

Mr. Robin Squire: Education about the harmful effects of tobacco is a statutory requirement as part of national curriculum science. The Department has issued guidance to schools on their contribution towards ensuring pupils are aware of the health risks associated with smoking, and to teachers on addressing smoking within the school curriculum and on their contribution towards ensuring pupils are aware of the health risks associated with smoking, and to teachers on addressing smoking within the school curriculum and on appropriate smoking education materials.

Student Loans Company

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment she has made of the savings to date the Student Loans Company has made from out-sourcing arrangements with the SHL software computer system, compared with the use of in-house services; and if she will make a statement. [29530]

Mr. Forth: This is a matter for the Student Loans Company. I have asked the chief executive to write to the hon. Member with the information requested.

Unemployment (Merseyside)

Mr. Parry: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will make a statement on the measures taken by her Department to assist the unemployed in Merseyside. [29289]

Mr. Forth: In Merseyside, as elsewhere, the Employment Service and training and enterprise councils will continue to deliver a wide range of employment, enterprise and training programmes to help people find the best and quickest route back to employment.

Poverty and Racism

Mr. Byers: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans she has to take up the finance being provided by the European Union for programmes to tackle poverty and racism; and what amount is being offered. [29661]

Mr. Forth: The Government have recently agreed, in conjunction with other member states, the Commission's guidelines for its new EMPLOYMENT–INTEGRA initiative, which is designed to help vulnerable groups to enter the labour market. The UK will receive an additional 43.9 million ecu to support action under that initiative.

PRIME MINISTER

Lichfield

9. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the effects of the Government's policies on the people of Lichfield. [28487]

The Prime Minister: Lichfield has benefited fully from the Government's policies to provide the foundation for sustainable economic growth and improving living standards.

Scott Inquiry

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister what representations he has received from Sir Richard Scott, concerning the Government response in the media to the publication of his report into military exports to Iraq. [29507]

The Prime Minster: None.

Engagements

Mr. Harry Greenway: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 16 May. [28650]

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Thursday 16 May. [28651]

The Prime Minister: This morning, I presided at a meeting of the Cabinet and had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further meetings later today.

Committee on Standards in Public Life

Mr. Robert G. Hughes: To ask the Prime Minister when he expects to receive the second report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life; and if he will make a statement. [30147]

The Prime Minister: The second report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, under the chairmanship of Lord Nolan, is being published today as Command Paper 3270 and copies of the report have been placed in the Vote Office and the Library of the House. I should like to thank Lord Nolan and his colleagues for their continuing commitment and effort in discharging their important remit.

The second report covers further and higher education bodies, grant–maintained schools, training and enterprise councils, local enterprise companies and registered housing associations. I welcome the fact that the committee found these to be

"organisations in which very many voluntary Board members and paid staff work hard, maintain high standards and achieve good results.".

I should like to join Lord Nolan and his colleagues in putting on record the Government's appreciation and admiration of the dedicated unpaid service of so many thousands of volunteers in these local public spending bodies. This inquiry confirms the continuing vitality of voluntary service as one of the great strengths of the British system. This voluntary local commitment, channelled through a clear policy framework set by central Government, provides a successful formula for delivering high-quality service to meet local needs.

Naturally, the committee has identified some areas where it believes that improvements can be made and we shall now give the report the close study it deserves before making a considered response, particularly to those recommendations which are addressed directly on the Government.

Armed Forces (Health Services)

Mr. Robert G. Hughes: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement about the pay of medical and dental officers in the armed forces. [30149]

The Prime Minister: The Armed Forces pay review body has made recommendations on the pay of medial and dental officers in the armed forces in a supplementary report being published today. Copies are available in the Vote Office and the Library of the House.

The review body recommends that the daily rate of basic pay should be increased by an average of 3.8 per cent. from 1 April. Further it recommends that, along with other military personnel, the x-factor, which compensates for the balance of disadvantage of service life, should be increased by 0.5 per cent. to 12 per cent. The review body has also recommended increases in consultant pay, which are designed to improve retention in this area.

The Government have decided to accept the review body's recommendations but to stage their introduction in the same way as the earlier recommendations of the Armed Forces pay review body, and the recommendations of most of the other review bodies. The full award less 1 per cent. will be back-dated to 1 April, and the remainder will be paid from 1 December.

Official Hospitality

Mr. Tony Banks: To ask the Prime Minister how much was spent on official hospitality by his Department and all associated agencies in the financial year 1995–96. [28579]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 9 May 1996]:* My office spent £60,000 on official hospitality in 1995–96. This reflected twice as many receptions as in the previous year, primarily held to promote issues of importance. The details are set out below.

Receptions in 1995–96

Two General Receptions
South African Sports Initiative
Lord Lieutenants
Motability
Praemium Imperiale
Chartermark Winners
National Sports Initiative
World War Two Commemorations
Armed Forces
Eve of Session
Police
Education
London Fashion Week
UK Science, Engineering and Technology.

TRANSPORT

Buses (Roadworthiness Checks)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what additional resources are being allocated to roadworthiness enforcement in 1996–97 to allow more roadworthiness checks to be made on buses. [29535]

Mr. Norris: The level of roadworthiness enforcement on public service vehicles—PSVs—by the Vehicle Inspectorate in 1996–97 is forecast to increase by 16 per cent. compared with the budgeted level for 1995–96. This is equivalent to an increase of about two vehicle examiner man years.

Joint Enforcement Database Initiative

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, pursuant to his answer of 22 March, *Official Report*, column *387*, when he expects a decision to be made on the investment required for the joint enforcement database. [29571]

Mr. Norris: I have nothing to add to my earlier answer.

Health Visitors (Parking)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will include health visitors in the categories of exemptions from parking restrictions for medical personnel. [29547]

Mr. Norris: There are no general exemptions from parking restrictions for medical personnel. I understand that local agreements exist in London, and in some other parts of England and Wales, whereby the police, traffic wardens and parking attendants exercise discretion where doctors, nurses and midwives park illegally in the course of their work. These have no formal status in law, and their scope is a matter for local consideration.

Bus Operator Licences

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he expects the bus working group to report on the need for applications for operators' licences to provide financial projections to traffic commissioners. [29536]

Mr. Norris: I expect to receive the recommendations of the bus working group on this issue later this year.

Central Transport Group (Pay)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what has been the estimated outturn of the Civil and Public Services Association grades base pay bill in the central transport group for the end of the current financial year. [29557]

Mr. Norris: The estimated outturn for the CPSA grades base pay bill in the central transport group for the current financial year is not yet known as pay negotiations for the 1996–97 CPSA pay settlement are still in progress. The estimated outturn excluding the pay settlement is £9.4 million.

Driving Examiners

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) how many delegated driving examiners are authorised by *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the Driving Standards Agency; [29538]

(2) if he will list the pass and fail rates for delegated driving examiners together with those for examiners employed by the Driving Standards Agency. [29539]

Mr. Norris: The Driving Standards Agency has appointed, on behalf of the Secretary of State for Transport, 62 driving examiners to conduct driving tests for staff working in their organisations. There are 59 persons authoritised to conduct bus driving tests and three authoritised to conduct car driving tests.

The number of tests conducted and pass rates in 1995 were:

	Total	*Pass rate (per cent.)*
Passenger Carrying Vehicle tests		
DSA	15,060	50
Other examiners	6,926	63
Car tests		
DSA	1,493,642	47
Other examiners	301	72

The armed forces, police and fire brigades are also authorised to conduct driving tests for their staff. Statistics about the pass rates for those organisations are not collected by this Department.

Heavy Vehicle Driving Standards

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he expects the theory test questions for the large goods vehicle and passenger carrying vehicle driving test will be published; and if they will contain questions relating to drivers' hours rules. [29540]

Mr. Norris: The question bank for LGV and PCV tests will be published on 8 November. The question bank does contain questions on the rules relating to drivers' hours

Driving Theory Test Centre

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) what criteria were used in the decision not to locate a driving theory test centre in Crewe; [29534]

(2) what criteria were used when deciding the location of the proposed driving theory test centre. [29533]

Mr. Norris: The criteria for locating theory test centres across Great Britain were decided in order to give a balance between costs, the travelling distances to centres for candidates and the frequency with which test sessions would be available. They are that tests will be available: within five miles in districts—usually towns or cities—with population density of greater than or equal to 1,250 persons per sq km; within 40 miles in sparsely populated districts with a population density of fewer than 100 persons per km; within 20 miles in other districts where population density lies between these limits.

On this basis, it was decided not to locate a theory test centre in Crewe.

Channel Tunnel Safety Authority

Mr. Dunn: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport when he expects the Channel Tunnel Safety Authority to publish its annual report for the year 1994–95. [29737]

Mr. Watts: The Channel Tunnel Safety Authority has now published its seventh annual report, covering the period from 1 April 1994 to 31 March 1995. I have today arranged for copies to be placed in the Library of the House.

Stansted Airport

Sir Alan Haselhurst: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what decision he has reached on options to increase the limit on aircraft movements at Stansted airport. [29876]

Mr. Norris: Following consultation with interested parties, I am today laying before the House a draft order for an increase in the aircraft movement limit from 78,000 per annum to 120,000 per annum. Based on the latest information about the average number of passengers per aircraft, a revised limit of 120,000 movements per year will allow a throughput of 8 million passengers per annum. This throughput is expected to be reached in around 2000-01.

This proposal is consistent with the planning inquiry's conclusion that the timing of the further development of Stansted to a capacity of 15 million passengers per annum should depend on the rate of growth of demand.

The Government welcome the development of the less busy airports in the south-east. The increase to 120,000 movements per year would permit the continued growth of Stansted, providing more jobs for the local communities, in line with the further development of the associated infrastructure. This new limit would also ensure that growth of the airport is phased, allowing BAA, the airport operator, to invest in new facilities at the terminal as business grows.

Shadow Tolls

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what forecast he has made of the total cost of shadow tolls per annum from design, build, finance and operate road schemes to the Government in *(a)* 2000, *(b)* 2005 and *(c)* 2010. [29268]

Mr. Watts: I have asked the chief executive of the Highways Agency to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Lawrie Haynes to Mr. Colin Pickthall, dated 16 May 1996:

The Secretary of State for Transport has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about the cost of shadow tolls for design, build, finance and operate road schemes. We forecast expenditure of approximately £110m in 2000/01, £120m in 2005/6 and £130m in 2010/11 at cash prices on contracts let to date. Actual expenditure incurred will be dependent on traffic levels.

Rail Infrastructure

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what is the replacement cost of the permanent way and other railway infrastructure in Great Britain. [28475]

Mr. Watts: Railtrack's fixed asset values as at 31 March 1995 on a current cost basis are described in section D of part 10 of the Railtrack prospectus. Current cost is the cost of replacing the existing asset with an equivalent asset capable of performing its task. The total gross replacement cost of Railtrack's tangible fixed assets at 31 March 1995 was £19,366 million, of which £9,097 million related to the track. After taking into account accumulated depreciation, the amounts are £6,492 million and £1,467 million respectively. Fuller information is set out on pages 144 to 146 of the prospectus, a copy of which is available in the Library.

Mr. Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many *(a)* bridges, *(b)* viaducts and *(c)* other railway structures have been demolished by Railtrack since it assumed responsibility for the railway infrastructure. [28476]

Mr. Watts: Railtrack would demolish bridges or other structures only when they were no longer required for operational reasons and after any necessary consents had been granted. Exact figures could be obtained only at disproportionate cost because Railtrack does not hold this information centrally.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Committee of the Regions

Mr. Nigel Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he expects to announce the nomination of a new United Kingdom member of the Committee of the Regions to replace Mr. Roy Cross. [29686]

Mr. David Davis: My right hon. and learned Friend the Foreign Secretary has recently nominated Councillor Robert Eccles, JP, an independent member of Ryedale district council and of the new unitary York district council, to replace Mr. Cross.

Conference Representatives of Governments

Mr. Spearing: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what communication he has received from the secretariat of the conference of representatives of Governments of member states of the European Union concerning its endowment with a specific legal personality by an amendment to the present treaty of European Union. [29712]

Mr. David Davis: The secretariat has circulated a presidency note setting out options on the issue of legal personality for the European Union. The document is note No. 27 (CONF 3827/96). It was placed in the Library of the House on 8 May.

Indonesian Police

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many Indonesian police officers have received training in the United Kingdom under the police management training project in each year since 1990; and if he will list for each officer the *(a)* name, *(b)* rank, *(c)* cost of training, *(d)* duration of training and *(e)* United Kingdom police force which provided the training. [29506]

Mr. Hanley: Between 1990–91 and 1995–96, 24 Indonesian police officers have received training in the United Kingdom under the police management training project. Details are given in the table, which records that several officers came to the UK for training more than once. The training costs quoted are approximate.

Year/name	Rank	Cost (£)	Date training commenced	Date training completed	Training provider
1990–91					
Scholarships					
Mr. Yusnar Arsyad	Lieutenant Colonel	8,300	16 August 1990	15 December 1990	Royal Institute of Public Administration
Mr. Adjie Rustam Ramdja	Major	8,300	16 August 1990	15 December 1990	Royal Institute of Public Administration
Mr. Deddy S.K.	Lieutenant Colonel	8,300	16 August 1990	15 December 1990	Royal Institute of Public Administration
Mr. Medhy Chumadi	Lieutenant	8,300	16 August 1990	15 December 1990	Royal Institute of Public Administration
Study tours					
Mr. C. H. M. Waskito	Colonel	3,100	July 1990	July 1990	Surrey Police
Mr. F. Sumampow	Lieutenant Colonel	3,100	July 1990	July 1990	Surrey Police
Mr. H Rasyid	Colonel	3,100	July 1990	July 1990	Surrey Police
Mr Soebariliyono	Lieutenant Colonel	3,100	July 1990	July 1990	Surrey Police
Mr Suryaningprang	Lieutenant Colonel	3,100	July 1990	July 1990	Surrey Police
Mr. Y. Y. Laoli	Lieutenant Colonel	3,100	July 1990	July 1990	Surrey Police
Mr. D. Rustadi	Lieutenant Colonel	3,100	July 1990	July 1990	Surrey Police
Mr. M. Thoyib	Captain	3,100	July 1990	July 1990	Surrey Police
Mr. N. Eko	Captain	3,100	July 1990	July 1990	Surrey Police
Mr. Lihawa	Brigadier General	3,100	July 1990	July 1990	Surrey Police
1991–92					
Scholarships					
Ms Minton Mariaty Simanjuntak	Major	8,000	13 September 1991	12 December 1991	Surrey Police
Mr. Soekamid	Major	9,000	1 October 1991	30 September 1992	Salford University
Mr. Yadi Ermiyadi	Captain	9,000	1 October 1991	30 September 1992	Kent University
Study tours					
Mr. F. Sumampow	Lieutenant Colonel	3,000	July 1991	July 1991	Surrey Police
Mr. H. Rasyid	Colonel	3,000	July 1991	July 1991	Surrey Police
Mr. Soebariliyono	Lieutenant Colonel	3,000	July 1991	July 1991	Surrey Police
Mr. Suryaningprang	Lieutenant Colonel	3,000	July 1991	July 1991	Surrey Police
Mr. Y. Y. Laoli	Lieutenant Colonel	3,000	July 1991	July 1991	Surrey Police
Mr. D. Rustadi	Lieutenant Colonel	3,000	July 1991	July 1991	Surrey Police
Mr. M. Thoyib	Captain	3,000	July 1991	July 1991	Surrey Police
Mr. N. Eko	Captain	3,000	July 1991	July 1991	Surrey Police
Mr. Soekamid	Major	3,000	July 1991	July 1991	Surrey Police
Mr. Yadi Ermiyadi	Captain	3,000	July 1991	July 1991	Surrey Police
1992–93 Scholarships					
Mr. Soekamid	Major	13,500	1 October 1992	30 September 1993	Salford University
Mr. Y Ermiyadi	Captain	13,500	1 October 1992	30 September 1993	Sheffield University
Ms Pengasihan Gaut	Major	8,500	1 August 1992	30 November 1992	Thames Valley University
Mr. Adjie Rustam Ramdja	Major	8,500	8 December 1992	7 April 1993	Manchester University
Mr. Pepe Tjahjana	Lieutenant Colonel	8,500	8 December 1992	7 April 1993	Manchester University
Study tours					
Mr. C. H. M. Waskito	Colonel	2,865	July 1992	July 1992	Surrey Police
Mr. F. Sumampow	Lieutenant Colonel	2,865	July 1992	July 1992	Surrey Police
Mr. H. Rasyid	Colonel	2,865	July 1992	July 1992	Surrey Police
Mr. Soebarliyono	Lieutenant Colonel	2,865	July 1992	July 1992	Surrey Police
Mr. Suryaningprang	Lieutenant Colonel	2,865	July 1992	July 1992	Surrey Police
Mr. Y. Y. Laoli	Lieutenant Colonel	2,865	July 1992	July 1992	Surrey Police
Mr. D. Rustadi	Lieutenant Colonel	2,865	July 1992	July 1992	Surrey Police
Ms Hemawati	Major	2,865	July 1992	July 1992	Surrey Police
Ms M. Simanjuntak	Major	2,865	July 1992	July 1992	Surrey Police
Ms R. P. Gaut	Major	2,865	July 1992	July 1992	Surrey Police
Mr. M. Thoyib	Captain	2,865	July 1992	July 1992	Surrey Police
Mr. N. Eko	Captain	2,865	July 1992	July 1992	Surrey Police
Mr. M. B. Hutagalung	Major General	2,865	July 1992	July 1992	Surrey Police
Mr. R. Lihawa	Brigadier General	2,865	July 1992	July 1992	Surrey Police
Mr. Karyoso	Brigadier General	2,865	July 1992	July 1992	Surrey Police
1993–94					
Scholarships					
Mr. Herman Rasyid	Colonel	3,000	21 May 1993	20 June 1993	Surrey Police
1994–95					
Scholarships					
Mr. Wakin	Major	5,000	1 July 1994	30 October 1994	Surrey Police

Year/name	Rank	Cost (£)	Date training commenced	Date training completed	Training provider
Mr. Nicholas Eko	Captain	13,500	1 August 1994	30 September 1995	Sheffield Hallam University
Mr. James Sitorus	Lieutenant Colonel	13,500	1 August 1994	30 September 1995	Sheffield Hallam University
Mr. Fred Sumampow	Lieutenant Colonel	5,000	13 April 1995	12 June 1995	Hertfordshire and Gloucestershire Police
1995–96					
Mr. Didi Rustadi	Lieutenant Colonel	6,000	9 April 1995	12 May 1995	Hertfordshire and Gloucestershire Police
Mr. Suryaningprang	Lieutenant Colonel	7,000	25 March 1996	26 April 1996	Hertfordshire and Gloucestershire Police
Mr. Soebarliyono	Lieutenant Colonel	7,000	25 March 1996	26 April 1996	Hertfordshire and Gloucestershire Police

HOME DEPARTMENT

Firemen

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* fatalities and *(b)* injuries have been suffered by firemen in the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [29048]

Mr. Sackville: The information is given in the table.

Deaths and injuries of fire brigade personnel while on duty in England and Wales 1992 to 1994–95

Year	England and Wales Deaths	England and Wales Injuries[1]
1992	3	861
1993[2] Q1	0	276
1993–94	3	797
1994–95	[3]1	737

Notes:

[1] Injuries are defined as those which result in absence of duty for at least one month or two weeks or more of hospitalisation.

[2] January to March 1993, followed by financial years—April to March.

[3] Died of natural causes attending a call.

Source:

Home Office.

Firearms

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department in each of the last two year, how many *(a)* pistols, *(b)* other handguns, *(c)* sub-machine guns, *(d)* rifles, *(e)* other firearms and *(f)* shotguns seized subsequently by the police, or surrendered under amnesty to the police, in (i) Manchester, (ii) Liverpool and (iii) the Metropolitan police areas, have been used in a crime, or have been seized by the police as being in the possession of persons conspiring to commit a crime; how many had been previously deactivated in accordance with the requirements of the Firearms Act 1988, and subsequently illegally reactivated; and in each category, how many were fitted with a sound modulator or silencer. [29277]

Mr. Maclean: Information on seizures of firearms, on sound moderators and on silencers is not available. There have been no firearms amnesties in the areas referred to in the past two years.

I shall write to the hon. Member with the available information about illegally reactivated firearms, which is being obtained from the Forensic Science Service.

Prisoners (Drugs)

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will break down by class the illegal drugs found on prisoners in England and Wales in the last available year; what assessment he has made of the advantage of restricting the visiting privileges available to prisoners who are tested positive for drug use and found in possession of illegal drugs; and if he will make a statement. [29394]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Butler to Mr. Alex Carlile, dated 16 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question asking for a break down by class of illegal drugs found on prisoners; and for an assessment of the advantage of restricting the visiting privileges available to prisoners who test positive for drugs and who are found in possession of illegal drugs.

Information is held centrally about drug finds reported by establishments and includes finds in various locations as well as finds on prisoners. Information relating to finds on prisoners could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

The breakdown by class of the illegal drugs finds reported by prisons in England and Wales during the 1995/96 financial year is shown in the table below.

	Number
Class A	1,019
Class B	7,020
Class C	81
Total	8,120

There were a further 404 finds for which no classification is available. As part of its drugs strategy, the Prison Service is introducing in a number of prisons, on a trial basis, mandatory closed or non contact visits for any prisoner found, through mandatory drug testing to have misused drugs, or who is known or reasonably suspected to have dealt in drugs in any way. This initiative will be carefully assessed and evaluated to see whether it should be extended to the rest of the prison estate.

Drug Misuse

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement as to the estimated percentage of non-drug offences which arise from, or are connected with, the misuse of drugs by male offenders in the 14 to 21 years age group. [29391]

Mr. Sackville: It is not currently possible to estimate with any accuracy the percentage of drug-related crime committed by male offenders in the 14 to 21 years age group.

Mr. Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what research his Department has commissioned concerning the relationship between the misuse of illegal drugs and other non-drug offences; and if he will make a statement. [29392]

Mr. Sackville: Research has been commissioned by the Home Office into the nature and incidence of drug-related crime, and projects currently in progress include interviewing and testing people arrested by the police to establish the extent of their drug misuse, obtaining information on how crack-cocaine addicts fund their habits and the impact of treatment programmes on offending behaviour.

Police Authorities

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the expenditure for each of the police authorities in England in 1995–96, their planned expenditure in 1996–97 and the percentage change in each case. [29616]

Mr. Maclean: The information requested is set out in the table.

	Planned revenue expenditure in 1995–96		*Planned revenue expenditure in 1996–97*	
	Budget	*Percentage increase over 1994–95*	*Spending power*[1]	*Percentage increase over 1995–96*
Force	*£ million*		*£ million*	
Avon and Somerset	147.75	7.2	154.62	4.6
Berdfordshire	55.4	10.6	57.54	3.9
Cambridgeshire	62.73	8.7	66.42	5.9
Cheshire	93.14	10.4	98.53	5.8
City of London	61.33	5.8	63.26	3.2
Cleveland	70.74	6.3	73.42	3.8
Cumbria	55.01	2.5	58.08	5.6
Derbyshire	88.29	7.9	92.49	4.8
Devon and Cornwall	146.5	6.2	153.5	4.8
Dorset	65.54	2.5	68.09	3.9
Durham	67.96	14.6	71.54	5.3
Essex	147.8	2.5	153.49	3.9
Gloucestershire	56.35	5.4	58.54	3.9
Greater Manchester	327.13	4.0	342.79	4.8
Hampshire	169.0	10.4	175.58	3.9
Hertfordshire	87.04	10.8	90.43	3.9
Humberside	98.11	8.9	103.11	5.2
Kent	158.1	5.4	164.22	3.9
Lancashire	155.47	6.7	163.56	5.2
Leicestershire	89.85	14.7	94.82	5.5
Lincolnshire	60.4	4.7	63.32	4.8
Merseyside	218.56	2.5	226.74	3.7
Metropolitan police	1,687.83	1.6	1,717.0	1.7
Norfolk	71.17	11.4	76.01	6.8
Northamptonshire	59.19	1.5	62.03	4.8
Northumbria	179.64	10.1	188.22	4.8
North Yorkshire	66.66	8.2	69.65	4.5
Nottinghamshire	110.23	10.4	115.24	4.5
South Yorkshire	147.22	7.6	154.78	5.1
Staffordshire	102.18	2.5	109.89	7.5
Suffolk	58.45	4.6	61.77	5.7
Surrey	84.1	2.5	87.33	3.8
Sussex	145.78	16.1	151.44	3.9
Thames Valley	194.41	2.5	204.06	5.0
Warwickshire	47.66	5.3	49.51	3.9
West Mercia	97.79	4.3	103.59	5.9
West Midlands	329.28	4.3	344.21	4.5
West Yorkshire	249.83	3.7	260.79	4.4
Wiltshire	59.29	2.5	61.58	3.9

[1] This figure is the total of the budget set by the police authority and the special grant for additional police officers in 1996–97.

Police Grant

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the police grant for each English police authority in *(a)* 1995–96 and *(b)* 1996–97; what was the percentage change; and how much that represents (i) per resident and (ii) per elector in each authority area. [29591]

Mr. Maclean: The information available is set out in the table. Numbers of electors are not available by police authority area. Numbers of electors by London boroughs, counties and districts are published by the Office for National Statistics in "Electoral Statistics 1995" (series EL No. 22), a copy of which is in the Library.

England	*Police grant paid in 1995–96* £	*Police grant paid in 1996–97* £	*Percentage change over 1995–96* £	*Amount per head of population 1995–96*[1] £	*Amount per head of population 1996–97*[1] £
Avon and Somerset	73,080,634	77,278,260	5.74	50	53
Bedfordshire	27,538,879	28,811,092	4.62	51	53
Cambridgeshire	31,136,129	33,348,537	7.11	45	48
Cheshire	46,286,157	49,500,131	6.94	47	51
City of London	26,753,210	27,831,884	4.03	5,119	5,326
Cleveland	35,134,959	36,816,273	4.79	63	66
Cumbria	26,869,743	28,688,560	6.77	55	59
Derbyshire	43,763,201	46,355,758	5.92	46	49
Devon and Cornwall	72,710,706	77,025,454	5.93	48	50
Dorset	30,950,898	32,474,611	4.92	46	48
Durham	33,683,229	35,827,979	6.37	55	59
Essex	72,744,989	76,160,629	4.70	49	51

England	Police grant paid in 1995–96 £	Police grant paid in 1996–97 £	Percentage change over 1995–96 £	Amount per head of population 1995–96 [1] £	Amount per head of population 1996–97 [1] £
Gloucestershire	27,919,401	29,317,079	5.01	51	53
Greater Manchester	162,401,953	171,880,949	5.84	63	67
Hampshire	83,989,820	88,068,573	4.86	49	51
Hertfordshire	43,244,815	45,304,535	4.76	51	53
Humberside	48,701,807	51,746,268	6.25	55	58
Kent	78,591,413	82,321,694	4.75	51	53
Lancashire	77,102,214	81,970,295	6.31	54	58
Leicestershire	44,419,616	47,395,525	6.70	48	52
Lincolnshire	27,459,730	29,232,699	6.46	45	48
Merseyside	106,672,413	112,588,958	5.55	74	78
Metropolitan police	827,595,814	846,761,947	2.32	111	114
Norfolk	35,376,168	38,205,064	8.00	46	50
Northamptonshire	27,592,869	29,320,943	6.26	46	49
Northumbria	88,858,912	94,046,011	5.84	62	65
North Yorkshire	33,100,745	34,961,340	5.62	46	48
Nottinghamshire	54,493,281	57,583,603	5.67	53	56
South Yorkshire	73,046,395	77,594,905	6.23	56	59
Staffordshire	50,200,542	54,610,654	8.78	48	52
Suffolk	29,042,990	31,033,584	6.85	45	48
Surrey	40,052,299	42,090,281	5.09	52	54
Sussex	72,343,209	75,763,690	4.73	50	52
Thames Valley	95,749,532	101,658,543	6.17	47	50
Warwickshire	23,595,032	24,725,312	4.79	48	50
West Mercia	48,154,173	51,605,192	7.17	43	46
West Midlands	163,211,148	172,342,961	5.60	62	66
West Yorkshire	123,524,528	130,447,666	5.60	59	62
Wiltshire	29,074,837	30,427,811	4.65	49	52

[1] Resident population at 30 June 1994—Source: Office for National Statistics (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys).

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the Welsh Office police grant to each police authority in Wales in *(a)* 1995–96 and *(b)* 1996–97; how much that represents per (i) resident and (ii) elector in each authority area; and what was the percentage difference in each case between 1995–96 and 1996–97.

Mr. Maclean: The information is set out in the table.

Police authority [1]	Police grant paid in 1995–96 £	Police grant paid in 1996–97 £	Percentage change over 1995–96	Amount per head of population 1995–96 [2] £	Amount per head of population 1996–97 [3] £	Percentage change over 1995–96	Amount per elector 1995–96 [2] £	Amount per elector 1996–97 [3] £	Percentage change over 1995–96
Dyfed-Powys	22,839,951	24,241,009	6.13	48.28	51.07	5.77	61.41	60.98	–0.71
Gwent	24,476,607	31,333,758	28.02	54.12	56.30	4.03	72.86	59.04	–23.39
North Wales	32,701,794	34,681,073	6.05	49.73	52.87	6.31	63.94	64.07	0.21
South Wales	75,959,258	75,246,910	–0.94	57.11	61.38	7.49	75.92	82.44	7.90

[1] The figures represent those grants paid in the respective years. Between the two settlements, there were boundary changes involving the district of Rhymney Valley, which moved from South Wales to Gwent police authority and three communities which moved from North Wales police authority to Dyfed-Powys police authority.
[2] Resident population at 30 June 1994—Source: Office for National Statistics (ONS).
[3] Resident population at 30 June 1994 adjusted to reflect boundary changes—Source: ONS.

HEALTH

Contracts

Mr. Milburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 22 March, *Official Report*, column *382*, if he will now make a statement on health service contracts agreed by health authorities for 1996–97. [29474]

Mr. Horam: Information on health service contracts agreed by health authorities will be placed in the Library.

Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research he has instigated into past cases of CJD, with particular reference to analysis of museum specimens, to establish whether the new strain of CJD recently reported to his Department existed previously. [28612]

Mr. Horam: The Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease surveillance unit in Edinburgh holds data going back to the 1970s on pathologically confirmed cases of CJD. The post mortem reports show no evidence of the new variant CJD—NVCJD—announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on 20 March 1996. Further checks on younger cases have produced no evidence of the earlier existence of NVCJD.

Some 32 United Kingdom and four European museum specimens dating from 1980 to 1990 have been examined by the CJD unit. Two UK cases dating from pre-1980 have also been examined.

Mental Health

Mr. Milburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 22 April, *Official Report*, column *24*, how many children have been admitted to *(a)* NHS psychiatric care and *(b)* non-NHS psychiatric care for each year since 1979; and how many children have been detained under the Mental Health Act 1983 or other provision for each year since 1979. [29478]

Mr. Bowis: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 22 April, *Official Report*, column *24*, for the information on children admitted to national health service psychiatric care. Information on the number of children admitted to registered private mental hospitals and nursing homes is not recorded centrally. The number of children detained for psychiatric care under the Mental Health Act 1983 and other provisions is not identifiable separately in the information available centrally.

Mr. Milburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients undergoing a mental health review tribunal under mental health legislation have been refused discharge on the ground of inadequate and inappropriate provision in the community, for each year since 1979. [29404]

Mr. Bowis: This information is not held centrally. Such grounds are not part of the criteria in sections 72 and 73 of the Mental Health Act 1983 but discharge can be delayed until a care plan under the care programme approach is in place.

Asbestos

Mr. Ian McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what information his Department collates in respect of the incidence of carcinoma of the larynx; and how many cases were attributed to an individual working with asbestos in the last five years for which figures are available. [29272]

Mr. Horam: There were 1,996 newly diagnosed cases of cancer of the larynx (ICD[1] 161) in 1990, the latest year for which data are available. Figures for earlier years are given in the annual reference volumes, "Cancer statistics: registrations", series MBI, copies of which are available in the Library.

Information on possible exposure—occupational or otherwise—to asbestos related to newly diagnosed cases of cancer of the larynx is not collected.

[1]International Classification of Diseases, 9th Revision.

National Register for Carers

Miss Lestor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what support his Department is giving to the National Register for Carers; and if he will make a statement. [29274]

Mr. Bowis: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Mr. Pickthall) on 7 May, *Official Report*, column *36*.

Epilepsy

Mr. Battle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into the effects on people with epilepsy of changes to their medication; [29309]

(2) what research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into the levels of misdiagnosis in respect of children suspected of suffering from epilepsy. [29313]

Mr. Bowis: The Department of Health has not commissioned research in these specific areas. The Medical Research Council is the main agency through which the Government commission biomedical and clinical research, which receives its grant in aid from the office of my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade. The MRC is always willing to consider scientifically sound research proposals and has identified neurological conditions, which include epilepsy, as an area in which it would particularly welcome proposals.

The Department of Health's central research development committee has a standing group on health technologies. This group has identified new anti-epileptic drugs and existing therapies as a priority area for research. A call for proposals will be made in June 1996. In addition, a large MRC multi-centre study has recently been set up to compare immediate versus deferred treatment with anti-epileptic drugs.

Mr. Battle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the preferred medicine choices for people with epilepsy that are contained in the prodigy pilot study on computer-assisted prescribing currently being evaluated. [29311]

Mr. Bowis: I refer the hon. Member to the reply my hon. Friend the Minister for Health gave my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) on 18 December 1995, *Official Report*, column *945*.

Mr. Battle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many nurses specialising in the care of people with epilepsy are employed in the national health service; [29315]

(2) how many hospital consultants and paediatricians specialising in the treatment of epilepsy are employed in the national health service. [29314]

Mr. Bowis: This information is not available centrally.

Mr. Battle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much money was spent on medicines for the treatment of epilepsy in the last five years. [29308]

Mr. Bowis: The table shows the information for England for the period 1991 to 1995. The data were obtained from the prescription cost analysis system, an information system administered by the Prescription Pricing Authority The figures are in terms of net ingredient cost which has increased from £26 million in 1991 to £48.5 million in 1995. The figures for 1995 are based on provisional data.

Net ingredient cost of drugs prescribed for the treatment of epilepsy

England

Year	*Net ingredient cost (£ millions)*
1991	26.0
1992	31.0
1993	36.3
1994	41.8
1995	48.5

1. Drugs used for the treatment of epilepsy are those preparations in the British National Formulary (issue 28 September 1994) therapeutic group 4.8—antiepileptics. Some of the drugs in this section may be used for other conditions.

2. The data are from the Prescription Cost Analysis system and cover all prescriptions dispensed by community pharmacists and appliance contractors, dispensing doctors and personal administration.

3. The net ingredient cost refers to the cost of the drug before discounts and does not include any dispensing costs or fees.

4. The figures for 1995 are based on provisional data.

Mr. Battle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of medicines prescribed for the treatment of epilepsy was for *(a)* generic preparations and *(b)* branded medicines in each of the last five years for which records are available. [29310]

Mr. Bowis: The table shows the information for England for the period 1991 to 1995 obtained from the prescription cost analysis system. The figures for 1995 are based on provisional data.

Proportion of generic and branded drugs prescribed for the treatment of epilepsy

England		*Percentage*
Year	*Generic*	*Branded*
1991	41.2	58.8
1992	43.5	56.5
1993	45.8	54.2
1994	46.7	53.3
1995	50.0	50.0

1. Drugs used for the treatment of epilepsy are those preparations in the British National Formulary (issue 28 September 1994) therapeutic group 4.8—antiepileptics. Some of the drugs in this section may be used for other conditions.

2. The data are from the prescription cost analysis system and cover all prescriptions dispensed by community pharmacists an appliance contractors, dispensing doctors and personal administration.

3. Drugs prescribed generically include drugs prescribed and dispensed generically and drugs prescribed generically but dispensed as a branded drug because a generic is not available (for example the branded is still under patent).

4. The figures for 1995 are based on provisional data.

Mr. Battle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans his Department has to issue guidance to the regional offices of the national health service executive on appropriate standards of care for people with epilepsy. [29312]

Mr. Bowis: I have no current plans to do so.

Mr. Battle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions his Department held with GPs and patient organisations before deciding which medicines should be included for the treatment of epilepsy in the prodigy pilot study. [29316]

Mr. Bowis: We fund several sources of information for general practitioners on drug treatments, consulting a wide range of professional and other bodies as appropriate. GPs are of course free to choose which drugs to prescribe for their patients, in the light of the information available to them.

Mr. Battle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what advice his Department has issued to doctors treating people with epilepsy regarding consistency and continuity in prescribing medicines. [29318]

Mr. Bowis: While it is our policy to encourage generic prescribing, we expect the doctor to choose the product which, in his clinical judgment, is most appropriate for the patient's condition. The British National Formulary, issued free of charge to all doctors, recognises that bioavailability can be a problem, making it necessary that some patients remain with one brand.

Prescription Guidelines

Mr. Battle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many medicines are currently contained in the prescription guidelines; and if the guidelines include brand names. [29317]

Mr. Malone: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) on 18 December 1995, *Official Report,* column *946* and to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, North-East (Mr. Congdon) on 19 December 1995, *Official Report,* column *1154.*

Doctors

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many of those who completed their training as doctors in each of the last 10 years were *(a)* men and *(b)* women. [29323]

Mr. Malone: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave her on 19 March, *Official Report,* column *190.*

Embryos

Mr. Alton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has to instruct the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority to contract donors of sperm or eggs whose embryos will be kept past the five-year limit. [29338]

Mr. Horam: Most embryos currently in store were created from gametes from couples being treated together. In a small number of cases, donor gametes were used. The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority has issued guidance on the steps to be taken to alert couples and, where appropriate, donors to the arrangements available for extending the storage period. The authority has also had a series of meetings with centres where it has stressed the importance of making all reasonable effort to contact those whose embryos are nearing the end of their storage period.

Committees (Membership)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list the present members of *(a)* the Committee on the Medical Aspects of Food Policy, *(b)* the Committee on Mutagenicity of Chemicals in Food and *(c)* the Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Foods, together with their current employers; [29285]

(2) which present members of *(a)* the Committee on the Medical Aspects of Food Policy, *(b)* the Committee on Mutagenicity of Chemicals in Food and *(c)* the Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, are in receipt of grants from private companies. [29286]

Mr. Horam: Current membership of the Committee on Medical Aspects of Food Policy is as follows:

Chairman

Sir K. Calman: Chief Medical Officer

Members

Professor P. Aggett: Head of Department of Nutrition, Diet and Health, Biotechnology and Biological Research Council Institute of Food Research, Norwich

Professor K. Alberti[1]: Professor of Medicine, University of Newcastle upon Tyne

Dr S. Bingham: Senior Scientist, Medical Research Council Dunn Clinical Nutrition Centre, Cambridge

Dr. H. Campbell[1]: Chief Medical Officer, Department of Health and Social Security Northern Ireland

Professor F. Cockburn: Samson Gemmell Professor of Child Health, University of Glasgow

Dr. H. Denner (until July 1995)[1]: Chief Scientist (Food), Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food

Mr. B. Dickinson (From August 1995)[1]: Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food

Professor J. Grimley Evans: Division of Geriatric Medicine, Nuffield Department of Clinical Medicine, University of Oxford

Ms A . Foster: Director, Scottish Consumer Council

Dr. G. Fowler: Clinical Reader in General Practice, Department of Public Health and Primary Care, University of Oxford

Dr. D. Hine[1]: Chief Medical Office, Scottish Office

Professor A. A. Jackson: Professor of Human Nutrition, University of Southampton

Professor W. P. T. James: Director, Rowett Research Institute, Aberdeen

Dr. M. Kemp[1]: Medical Research Council

Dr. R. Kendell[1]: Chief Medical Officer, Welsh Office

Professor M. Marmot: Professor of Epidemiology and Public Health, University College Medical School, London

Dr. D. Richardson: Nestlé UK Limited

Ms L. Stockley[1]: Health Education Authority

[1] Ex officio.

Current membership of the Committee on Mutagenicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Enviornment is as follows:

Members

Professor J. M. Parry (Chair): University College of Swansea

Professor J. Ashby: Zeneca

Professor R. L. Carter: The Royal Marsden NHS Trust

Dr. J. Cole: Medical Research Council, University of Sussex

Dr. C. Cooper: The Institute of Cancer Research, Haddow Laboratories

Professor D. S. Davies: Royal Postgraduate Medical School, Hammersmith Hospital

Professor H. J. Evans: Medical Research Council Human Genetics Unit, Western General Hospital

Professor R. F. Newbold: The University of West London

Dr. D. J. Tweats: Glaxo Research and Development Ltd.

Dr. S. Venitt: The Institute of Cancer Research, Haddow Laboratories.

Current membership of the Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment is as follows:

Members

Professor H. F. Woods (Chair): Royal Hallamshire Hospital

Professor P. Aggett: Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, Norwich

Dr. P. N. Bennett: University of Bath, Wolfson Centre

Dr. N. A. Brown: Medical Research Council Experimental Embryology and Teratology Unit, St. George's Hospital Medical School

Dr. J. K. Chipman: The University of Birmingham

Professor A. D. Dayan: Department of Health Toxicology Laboratory

Professor G. G. Gibson: University of Surrey

Professor G. M. Hawksworth: University of Aberdeen

Dr. M. Joffe: St. Mary's Hospital Medical School

Dr. I. Kimber: Zeneca

Dr. D. Prentice: Self employed

Dr. A. G. Renwick: University of Southampton

Dr. A. G. Smith: University of Leicester

Dr. A. Thomas: Plymouth General Hospital

Dr. M. J. Tucker: Retired

Relevant grants for research from private companies are declared by members in the appropriate register of commercial interests. A copy of these are available in the Library.

General Practitioners

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many of whose who completed their training as GPs in each of the last 10 years were *(a)* men and *(b)* women. [29324]

Mr. Malone: The information is not available centrally.

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many of those in general practice in each of the last 10 years were *(a)* men and *(b)* women. [29322]

Mr. Malone: This information is contained in "General Medical Services Statistics for England and Wales", copies of which are available in the Library.

NHS Trusts (Insurance Premiums)

Mr. Milburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what are the costs to trusts of paying insurance premiums each year. [29667]

Mr. Horam: Information on national health service trust insurance premium costs is not available centrally.

Supervision Registers

Mr. Milburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients are currently on supervision registers. [29671]

Mr. Bowis: The latest complete set of information indicates that 3,498 patients were reported to be on supervision registers at 31 December 1995.

Property Sales

Mr. Milburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 21 March, *Official Report*, column *321*, (1) what estimate he has made of the annual proceeds from the sale of properties in each of the next 10 years; [29714]

(2) if his estimate of proceeds from the sale of surplus or potentially surplus properties has been assumed in published public expenditure survey accounts. [29715]

Mr. Horam: The estimated annual proceeds from the sale of non-national health service trust properties over the next four years is shown in the table, together with an aggregate estimate of sales after 2000. The figures are based on the best estimate of estates advisors to the NHS executive. The estimates are based on current open market values and are liable to change as a result of fluctuations in property market values. Actual proceeds may be subject to considerable variation since many properties scheduled for sale are currently in operational use and the estimates are based on provisional disposal dates.

Estimates of the proceeds from the sale of surplus non-national health service trust properties have been taken into account as capital receipts in the Government's expenditure plans, published as Cm 3212 in March.

Year	*Estimated annual proceeds £ million*
1996–97	237
1997–98	220
1998–99	213
1999–00	223
Post 2000	311
Total	1,204

Regional Health Authorities (Financial Reserves)

Mr. Milburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what financial reserves have been held by regions for each of the last four years. [29670]

Mr. Horam: Donation reserve by regional health authorities in England are shown in the tables.

£ Thousands

	1991–92	*1992–93*	*1993–94*
Northern RHA	48	40	93
Yorkshire RHA	224	222	48
Trent RHA	101	69	48
East Anglia RHA	65	53	758
North West Thames RHA	0	36	737
North East Thames RHA	0	0	0
South East Thames RHA	0	0	0
South West Thames RHA	117	11	0
Wessex RHA	0	0	0
Oxford RHA	0	0	0
South Western RHA	0	0	0
West Midlands RHA	0	0	0
Mersey RHA	0	0	0
North Western RHA	10	8	7

	1994–95 £000s
Northern and Yorkshire RHA	1,905
Trent RHA	0
Anglia and Oxford RHA	1,636
North East Thames RHA	0
South West Thames RHA	0
South and West RHA	0
West Midlands RHA	0
North West RHA	4

Source:

The annual accounts of regional and district health authorities and the special health authorities of the London postgraduate teaching hospitals.

Social Services (Wirral)

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he has received the report from the social services inspectorate on the functioning of Wirral social services department. [29713]

Mr. Bowis: The social services inspectorate, working with the north-western regional office of the national health service executive, will shortly complete its investigation into the implementation of community care by Wirral metropolitan borough council and the Wirral health authority. In the light of its conclusions, we shall consider what further action, if any, is required.

Section 64 Grants

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Eccles (Miss Lestor) of 5 March, *Official Report,* column *185,* if he will list the organisations *(a)* within and *(b)* outside London to which grants will be paid in the current financial year under the section 64 grant scheme; and if he will indicate the amount of each grant and whether the organisation has previously received such grants. [29331]

Mr. Bowis: Grants can be authorised at any time during the year. Comprehensive information about those paid during 1996–97 will not therefore be available before the end of that year. The majority of grants go to national organisations.

Social Services (Essex)

Dr. Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects the chief inspector of social services to *(a)* commence and *(b)* conclude his investigations into Essex social services. [29582]

Mr. Bowis: The social services inspectorate will shortly complete its investigation into the implementation of community care by Essex county council. Material originally submitted by the end of March is being updated in the light of newly available statistical data. In the light of the inspectorate's conclusions, we shall consider what further action, if any, is required.

NHS Trusts (Cost Improvements)

Mr. Milburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many trusts have failed to meet their cost improvement target in each of the last two years. [29668]

Mr. Horam: This information is not available centrally.

Business Subsidies

Mrs. Roche: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the grants and loans provided by his Department to businesses, together with the criteria they have to meet in order to obtain the subsidy. [28189]

Mr. Horam *[holding answer 7 May 1996]:* The Department makes no grants or loans to businesses.

GP Practices

Mr. Milburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many general practitioner practices there were in each region in 1995–96; and what each figure was as a proportion of the total. [29572]

Mr. Malone: The information is shown in the table.

Number of general practitioner practices in England at 1 April 1995

NHS executive regional office	*Number of practices*	*Percentage of total practices*
Northern and Yorkshire	1,188	13.1
Trent	842	9.3
Anglia and Oxford	780	8.6
North Thames	1,611	17.8
South Thames	1,277	14.1
South and West	1,001	11.0
West Midlands	1,056	11.7
North West	1,308	14.4
England	9,063	100.0

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Milburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the PFI schemes worth over £5 million indicating for each *(a)* the costs of preparing outline and full business cases and *(b)* the amount spent on consultancies. [29665]

Mr. Horam: The table shows private finance initiative schemes with a capital value of more than £5 million that have been approved to date:

NHS body (by Region)	*Nature of scheme*	*Capital value (£ million)*
Northern and Yorkshire Region		
Yorkshire regional health authority	Clinical waste incinerator	5.6
United Leeds Teaching Hospital NHS trust	Provision of power station	5.8
St. James's University Hospital NHS trust	New paediatric wing, private patients unit and medipark	50.0
Anglia and Oxford Region		
Royal Berkshire and Battle Hospital NHS trust	Office accommodation, car parking, private patients wing and retail outlets	20.0
South Buckinghamshire NHS trust	New hospital developments at High Wycombe and Amersham	35.0
Norfolk and Norwich NHS trust	New district general hospital	170.0
South Thames Region		
South East London Commission Agency	Office accommodation	11.0
St. Peter's Hospital NHS trust	Housing redevelopment	5.2
South and West Region		
Swindon and Marlborough NHS trust	Redevelopment of St. Margaret's hospital	90.0
National		
NHS executive	NHS-wide clearing service	5.5

Information on the costs of preparing outline and full business cases, and on consultancy costs, is not collected centrally.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Arms Export Licences

Mr. McAvoy: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what was the total value of the licences granted for the export of arms manufactured in the United Kingdom to the former Yugoslavia, for each year between 1987 and 1991; and what is his policy on the granting of such licences currently. [27445]

Mr. Oppenheim: The first part of this question could be answered only at disproportionate cost.

The UK has observed the UN arms embargo of former Yugoslavia with effect from 25 September 1991. The Government's current policy was set out in an answer given by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury, (Mr. Lidington), 31 January 1996, *Official Report*, column *766*.

Land Mines

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) how many export licences for land mines possessing a self-destruct mechanism have been *(a)* applied for and *(b)* granted in each year since 1990; [28316]

(2) how many export licences for components which can be used in the manufacture of land mines have *(a)* been applied for and *(b)* granted in each year since 1990. [28317]

Mr. Oppenheim: It has been the practice of successive Administrations not to disclose details of applications for export licences or export licences. The hon. Lady may be aware that, following the publication of the Scott report, the Government have accepted Sir Richard Scott's recommendation that we should review this convention. The Ministry of Defence is taking the lead in the review and is consulting widely during its consideration.

In this case, however, I am prepared to say that no export licences have been applied for, or granted, for anti-personnel land mines or for specially designed components for such mines during the period in question.

Car Imports (Germany)

Mr. Redwood: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is the tariff levied on *(a)* British, *(b)* Swiss and *(c)* Japanese cars imported into Germany. [28917]

Mr. Nelson: No tariff is levied on British cars. The Community common customs tariff of 10 per cent. is charged on Japanese and Swiss cars unless the latter qualify for EC-EFTA—European Free Trade Association—preference, in which case they enter Germany duty free.

Mechanical Engineered Products

Mr. Redwood: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is the tariff levied by Germany on imports from *(a)* the United Kingdom, *(b)* Switzerland and *(c)* Japan of mechanical engineered products. [28918]

Mr. Nelson: No tariff is levied on imports from the United Kingdom nor on Swiss goods qualifying for EC-EFTA—European Free Trade Association—preference. Other Swiss products and products from Japan are charged the tariffs laid down in the Community common customs tariff. Current rates are contained in Commission regulations (EC) No. 3009/95, *Official Journal* L 319 of 30 December 1995. Most mechanical engineered products are classified from chapter 84 onwards.

Crown Post Offices

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how much money the Post Office has generated from the introduction of agency status in *(a)* Scotland *(b)* throughout the rest of the United Kingdom in each financial year since the introduction of the policy. [28965]

Mr. Oppenheim: I understand from the Post Office that the recurring financial benefits, on a national basis, from the policy of converting crown post offices to agency status are as follows:

Net recurring benefits from that year's conversions

Year	*£ million*
1989–90	4.4
1990–91	3.9
1991–92	4.1
1992–93	3.4
1993–94	3.9
1994–95	[1]4.1
1995–96	[1]3.9

[1] Estimated.
Total cumulative recurring benefit: £27.7 million.

Separate figures for Scotland could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what criteria are used by the Post Office in assessing which crown post offices should be given agency status. [29066]

Mr. Oppenheim: I understand from the Post Office that it uses the following criteria in assessing crown post offices for conversion to agency status:

the customer service benefits of changing, eg longer opening hours, better location;

financial benefits;

ability to redeploy any surplus staff;

availability of a suitable partner to become agent.

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what surveys the Post Office has carried out on the impact of agency status and franchising on the operation of former crown post offices. [29065]

Mr. Oppenheim: I understand that the Post Office has conducted regular customer opinion surveys of the offices that have converted to agency status. The results show that customers prefer the new agency offices, principally due to improvements in the office environment and longer opening hours.

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many staff who formerly worked in crown post offices have left employment following the introduction of agency status. [28963]

Mr. Oppenheim: I understand from the Post Office that, when a crown post office is to be converted to agency status, staff are offered redeployment opportunities or voluntary redundancy terms. The total number of Post Office Counters Ltd. staff who have accepted voluntary redundancy since the introduction of the crown conversion policy is 4,288. It is not possible to say how many of those who opted for voluntary redundancy terms did so as a result of the conversion of crown offices to agency status.

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many crown post offices in Ayrshire have been converted to agency status since the introduction of the policy; and how many crown post offices there are currently in Ayrshire. [28987]

Mr. Oppenheim: I understand from the Post Office that 13 former crown post offices in Ayrshire have been converted to agency status since 1989. At the end of April 1996, there were five crown post offices in Ayrshire.

Colliery Areas (Regeneration)

Mrs. Clywd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what allocation of the reserve fund for Community initiatives from the EU will be made available for RECHAR in the United Kingdom. [29463]

Mr. Oppenheim: I shall announce the allocation as soon as possible.

British Coal Industrial Death and Retirement Fund

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment he has made of the conformity of British Coal's appropriation of the assets of the industrial death and retirement fund with clause 18 of the fund's governing document. [29505]

Mr. Page: The operation of the industrial death and retirement scheme—IDRS—is a matter for British Coal. However, I understand that the chairman of British Coal has written to the hon. Member previously, outlining the corporation's powers under clause 18.

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what representations he has received, and from which bodies, asserting that the British Coal industrial death and retirement fund was intended to be a trust. [29504]

Mr. Page: I have not received any such representations.

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will take steps to ascertain from British Coal if there was an intention to create a trust or fund when the industrial death and retirement fund was created. [29503]

Mr. Page: This is a matter for British Coal. However, I understand that the chairman of British Coal has written to the hon. Member previously, confirming the nature of the scheme when it was established.

Trade Associations

Mr. MacShane: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what steps his Department has taken to put into effect the proposals contained in the model trade association paper. [29657]

Mr. Page: The best practice guide for the model trade association was developed by the DTI in consultation with trade associations and other representative bodies including the Confederation of British Industry, the Institute of Directors, the Engineering Employers Federation and the Federation of Small Businesses.

It is for trade associations to reach decisions about putting the guide into effect. I and my colleagues and officials are, however, actively encouraging adoption of the model through discussions with individual associations. We are also supporting a benchmarking club which aims to set benchmark standards against which trade associations may measure their performance in the various areas covered by the model.

Business Failures

Mr. Khabra: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what was the number of business failures in the first quarter of *(a)* 1996 and *(b)* 1995. [28488]

Mr. Oppenheim: The number of compulsory liquidations, creditors' voluntary liquidations and bankruptcy orders in the first quarters of 1995 and 1996, by category and on a seasonally adjusted basis, are shown in the table:

	1995	*1996*
Compulsory liquidations	1,364	1,273
Creditors' voluntary liquidations	2,141	2,022
Bankruptcy orders	5,054	5,000

Domestic Gas Bills

Mr. Tredinnick: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment he has made of changes in domestic gas bills over the past five years. [28494]

Mr. Eggar: The average annual domestic gas bill, in real 1995 prices and excluding VAT, fell by more than 12 per cent. from 1991 to 1995. Including VAT, the fall over the same period was 5 per cent. in real 1995 prices.

Export and Import Control

Ms Quin: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans he has to bring forward legislation to replace the Export and Import Control Act 1990. [29350]

Mr. Nelson: I plan to publish a consultative paper on export licensing procedures in the summer. I shall consider, in the light of representations made to me in response to that paper, whether new legislation is needed to replace the Export and Import Control Act 1990.

Manufacturing Output

Mr. Pike: To ask the President of the Board of Trade in which regions of England there has been a decline in manufacturing output since 1979. [28358]

Mr. Lang: The information requested is not available. Overall, manufacturing output has risen by 12 per cent. since 1979. The latest CBI "Regional Trend Survey" shows manufacturers are expecting strong output growth in all regions.

WALES

M4

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations his Department has received concerning the need for an integrated transport study of the M4 corridor; and if he will make a statement. [27922]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The Welsh Office has received several representations in response to the public consultation on the M4 relief road—Major to Castleton—proposals.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans his Department has to undertake an integrated transport study of the M4 corridor; and if he will make a statement. [27899]

Mr. Jones: My right hon. Friend and I have no plans but the development of proposals for the M4 relief road will include an assessment of alternative transport modes.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when his Department plans to publish a draft order concerning the M4 relief road; and if he will make a statement. [27898]

Mr. Jones: It will be several years before the necessary work has been done to identify the scheme details and prepare draft orders.

Beef Producers

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how he will assist beef producers in respect of their cash flow; and if he will make a statement. [28406]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The Government have introduced a series of measures to assist beef producers. The two main aids are the calf processing scheme and compensation for animals over 30 months which no longer have a market. Both schemes are operational in Wales and will help producers' cash flow.

In addition, I arranged for payments of subsidies to Welsh beef producers to be accelerated and over £66 million—representing 90 per cent. of livestock payments—was paid during April 1996.

Cattle Slaughter Scheme

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what proposals he has to compensate farmers for the transport costs of delivering cattle from collection points to abattoirs under the slaughter scheme. [28548]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: Under the 30 month slaughter scheme, the Government pay the cost of carcase disposal.This includes the transport costs beyond the abattoir. Costs for transporting live animals to abattoirs is the responsibility of producers either directly or via the commission charged by livestock markets.

Regional Selective Assistance

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the foreign-owned companies which have been granted regional selective assistance in the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [28655]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: Negotiations between the Welsh Office and applicants are confidential. However, certain information on offers of assistance of over £75,000 is published in "Labour Market Trends"—previously in the "Employment Gazette"—following the first payment of grant.

Between 1 April 1991 and 31 March 1996, 186 firms described as foreign owned at the time of the application received offers of regional selective assistance towards a total of 204 projects. These offers totalled £218 million and the projects were forecast to create or safeguard some 30,000 jobs and involved private investment of £1.8 billion.

Physiotherapists

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many physiotherapists there were in *(a)* general practices and *(b)* hospitals, in each health board area, in each of the last two years; and if he will make a statement. [28708]

Mr. Richards: The available information is given in the following table. Staff employed by NHS trusts are shown in the health authority area in which the trust is situated.

Staff in post (whole-time equivalent numbers)

Old Health Authority area	*General practices*[1] *1993*	*Hospital and community*[2] *1994*	*1994*	*1995*
Clwyd[3]	—	1	92	93
East Dyfed	—	—	51	49
Gwent	—	—	99	111
Gwynedd	—	—	62	65
Mid Glamorgan	—	—	87	87
Pembrokeshire	—	—	[5]—	[5]—
Powys[3]	—	1	[5]—	30
South Glamorgan[3]	—	—	148	142
West Glamorgan	3	3	89	87
WHCSA[4]	—	—	2	2

[1] At 1 October.

[2] At 30 September.

[3] The data may exclude a small number of staff, in the hospital and community, paid on local payscales for whom no details of occupation are available centrally.

[4] Welsh Health Common Services Authority.

[5] As most staff in the relevant pay groups are paid on local payscales and details of occupation are not available centrally, no reliable information can be given.

Agricultural Pollution

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is his policy on agricultural pollution. [29044]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: Pollution is tackled through a variety of measures. These include the provision of free advice to farmers, the availability of codes of good agricultural practice, a programme of targeting specific river catchment areas identified in consultation with the Environment Agency where farmers are encouraged to prepare their own farm waste management plans, and the availability of waste handling grants in nitrate vulnerable zones.

Beef

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how he plans to assist farmers who raise mature beef; and if he will make a statement. [29046]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 14 May 1996, *Official Report,* column *422.*

North Wales Fire Authority

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received concerning the funding of the north Wales fire authority. [29047]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: We have received a number of representations about revenue and capital funding for 1996–97.

Development Status (Cash Grants)

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) what was the total amount in cash grants given to those parts of the former county of Clwyd which were covered by full development status during the term they were so covered; [29049]

(2) what was the total amount in cash grants given to the former district of Alyn and Deeside in those years when it was covered by full development status; [29050]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: Information on all grants is not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Politically Restricted Posts

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many appeals have been lodged against the political restriction of their posts by Government employees during the last five years; how many of these appeals have been (i) successful and (ii) unsuccessful; and how many of these appeals have still to be dealt with. [29219]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: In the past five years, 11 applications for exemption from political restriction in Wales were made to the independent adjudicator appointed by my right hon. Friend under the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. All were granted exemption.

Cancelled Operations

Mr. Hanson: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) how many patients whose operations were cancelled were not re-admitted to hospital for a period exceeding four weeks in each quarter of *(a)* 1993–94, *(b)* 1994–95 and *(c)* 1995–96; [29278]

(2) if he will list the number of operations cancelled within 24 hours of the proposed operation time, in each of the health authorities in Wales for each *(a)* year and *(b)* quarter in (i) 1993–94, (ii) 1994–95 and (iii) 1995–96. [29279]

Mr. Richards: Information on the number of cancelled operations in Welsh hospitals is not collected centrally.

Sustainable Development

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what proposals the Environment Agency has to implement its remit to promote sustainable development in Wales. [29373]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: Section 4 of the Environment Act 1995 describes the principal aim of the agency, which relates to sustainable development and requires the agency to have regard to guidance issued by Ministers. A draft of the guidance was issued for consultation with the Environment Agency and others in December and the comments received are under consideration. The Government intend to lay a draft of the statutory guidance before Parliament shortly.

Student Hardship

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement indicating what funds his Department operates to alleviate hardship amongst Welsh students. [29603]

Mr. Richards: The Department makes access funds available to the Welsh funding councils for distribution to further and higher education institutions. These funds enable institutions to provide financial help to full-time students who are in financial difficulties. Some £1,661 million has been made available for this academic year and £1.732 million for next year.

Police Authorities (Council Tax)

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what was the band D council tax levied in respect of each of the police authorities in Wales in 1995–96 and 1996–97; what was the percentage increase in each case; and if he will make a statement. [29588]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The information requested is given in the following table. It would be noted that, for 1996–97, part of the area of the South Wales police authority—that of the Rhymney Valley district council—is transferred to the area of Gwent police authority.

Amounts of band D council tax bills relating to the levy by the relevant police authority, by police authority area

Police authority	*1995–96* £	*1996–97* £	*Percentage increase*
Dyfed-Powys	38.31	46.57	21.6
Gwent	38.69	46.78	20.9
North Wales	37.88	46.21	22.0
South Wales	38.23	46.36	21.3

Source:
Local authority budget requirements returns.

ENVIRONMENT

Business Rate Relief (Village and Charity Shops)

Mr. David Nicholson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what is his estimate of the amount of business rate relief in England and Wales, for the latest year for which figures are available, in respect of *(a)* village shops obtaining reduction or omission of rates under section 69 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988 and *(b)* charity shops. [28606]

Sir Paul Beresford: In 1994–95 in England and Wales, £2,309,392 of rate relief was granted to ratepayers under section 49 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988; and £450,935,653 was granted to charities. My Department does not keep information on the breakdown of these figures by types of business.

Asbestos

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what records are *(a)* collected and *(b)* evaluated in respect of the number of *(a)* men and *(b)* women suffering from asbestos-related diseases. [28602]

Sir Paul Beresford: The Department of Social Security keeps records of people suffering from certain asbestos-related disease which are prescribed for the purposes of industrial injuries disablement benefit. The records do not provide a complete count of the incidence of asbestos-related diseases as only those eligible to claim the benefit are recorded. From 1994, these records distinguish between men and women.

The Health and Safety Executive maintains records under the Reporting of Injuries Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995 (RIDDOR). These require employers, in certain circumstances only, to report certain asbestos-related diseases occurring among their employees. These figures distinguish between men and women.

Council Tax (Students)

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what discussions his Department has had with the Department of Social Security regarding the liability of students for council tax when sharing a house with people on income support. [29037]

Sir Paul Beresford: The Department reviews with the Department of Social Security from time to time a range of matters of mutual interest relating to the operation of the council tax and council tax benefit systems.

Mr. Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what plans his Department has to make changes to the regulations on the liability of students for council tax when sharing a house with people on income support. [29038]

Sir Paul Beresford: My right hon. Friend has no such plans.

Politically Restricted Posts

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how many local government employees work in politically restricted posts. [29216]

Sir Paul Beresford: Approximately 40,000 local authority posts in England and Wales are estimated to be so restricted.

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment how many appeals have been lodged against the political restriction of their posts by local

government employees during the last five years; how many of these appeals have been (i) successful and (ii) unsuccessful; and how many of these appeals have still to be dealt with. [29218]

Sir Paul Beresford: In the past five years, 516 applications for exemption from political restriction were made in respect of England to the independent adjudicator appointed under the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. Exemption was granted in 489 cases, declined in 24, and three applications are outstanding.

Passive Smoking

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment (1) what proposals he is now evaluating to encourage the leisure industry to protect workers and customers from the effects of passive smoking; [29221]

(2) what steps he is taking to guarantee a smoke-free atmosphere for those who work in the leisure industry. [29222]

Sir Paul Beresford: The Government's view is that passive smoking can best be addressed by voluntary means. The Department of the Environment has issued a code of practice for owners and managers of public places, providing practical guidance on implementing suitable policies on smoking. The code emphasises that such policies should protect both the public and non-smoking employees from passive smoking. The Health and Safety Executive has issued guidance to employers calling on them to adopt smoking policies to protect workers from the effects of environmental tobacco smoke.

The recently published results of a survey commissioned by the Department of the Environment show the leisure industry to be lagging behind in establishing effective smoking policies. The Government are currently considering how best to target advice and publicity campaigns further to encourage progress in these areas.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what discussions he has had with representatives of the workers in the licensed and restaurant trade regarding the dangers of passive smoking incurred by their workers in the leisure industry. [29230]

Sir Paul Beresford: I have held no discussions with representatives of workers in the licensed and restaurant trade on this subject.

Ofwat (Nature Conservation)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what guidance he proposes to give to the Office of Water Services with regard to the implications of the habitats directive to review licences and consent which could damage special protection areas and special areas of conservation; and how this will be reflected in its next price review. [29256]

Mr. Clappison: The review of abstraction licences and discharge consents in the light of the habitats directive is a matter for the Environment Agency. The conduct of periodic price reviews is a matter for the Director General of Water Services.

Mr. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what duty there is on Ofwat to further nature conservation. [29257]

Mr. Clappison: Section 3(2) of the Water Industry Act 1991 places a duty on the Director General of Water Services, in formulating or considering any proposals relating to the functions of a water or sewerage undertaker, to exercise his powers so as to further the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty and the conservation of flora, fauna and geological of physiographical features of special interest.

Water Companies

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what new measures the water companies propose to implement as result of their new duty to promote the efficient use of water. [29271]

Mr. Clappison: The measures water companies are taking to promote the efficient use of water amongst their customers are the responsibility of the water companies themselves. The Director General of Water Services is considering how he should use his powers to impose this requirement on water undertakers.

Water Leakage

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment (1) what action the water regulator is taking to ensure that the leakage targets which companies have set themselves are reasonable; [29320]

(2) how Ofwat will ensure that a consistent and coherent approach is adopted to water leakage by all water companies. [29321]

Mr. Clappison: The Director General of Water Services is involved in discussions with the water companies about their targets and the measures they are taking to reduce leakage.

Government Office, Yorkshire and Humberside

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what democratic accountability he proposes for the new structure of the integrated Government office in Yorkshire and Humberside. [29659]

Sir Paul Beresford: As head of the Government office for Yorkshire and Humberside, the regional director remains accountable to each of my right hon. Friends the President of the Board of Trade and the Secretaries of State for Education and Employment and for Transport and to me for the delivery of our particular policies and programmes.

Pollution Control

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will make it a requirement for the operators of integrated pollution control processes to advertise applications or variations of an authorisation in the national and relevant local press. [28477]

Mr. Clappison: Operators of processes falling under integrated pollution control have been required to advertise applications for, and variations of, authorisations in the relevant local press since the inception of the

regime in 1991. Such operators have additionally, since 1 April 1996, been required to advertise applications and variations in the *London Gazette*.

Planning Controls

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when he plans to bring forward legislation to abolish crown immunity from planning controls. [29269]

Sir Paul Beresford: We intend to remove crown exemption from the planning system as soon as a suitable legislative opportunity arises.

Planning Guidance

Ms Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when the regional planning guidance for Yorkshire and Humberside was subject to environmental appraisal using the guidance contained in "Policy Appraisal and the Environment"; if he will publish the appraisal; what alternative courses of action from those set out in the guidance were considered in the environmental appraisal; how the guidance was modified by the results of the environmental appraisal; and what procedures have been put in place by his Department to monitor the environmental impacts arising from the implementation of the guidance. [29490]

Sir Paul Beresford: The process of preparing regional planning guidance generally followed the principles set out in "Policy Appraisal and the Environment". The final guidance included numerous modifications to the original advice reflecting the views expressed by environmental organisations and others. It draws heavily on published national policy. A central theme of the guidance is the need to attain the objective of sustainability. I do not intend to publish a separate environmental appraisal in addition to the material already published.

The guidance asks that development plans prepared by local authorities be subject to environment appraisal to ensure that planning policies and proposals are consistent with the principles of sustainable development set out in the guidance. The arrangements for monitoring and review and the means whereby a cross-section of organisations and interests in the region can contribute to the process is currently the subject of discussions between the Government office and local planning authorities.

Water (Environmental Appraisal)

Ms Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when the "Water: Increasing Customer Choice" consultation paper was subject to an environmental appraisal using the guidance contained in "Policy Appraisal and the Environment"; if he will publish the appraisal; what alternative courses of action from those set out in the "Water: Increasing Customer Choice" consultation paper were considered in the environmental appraisal; how the paper was modified by the results of the environmental appraisal; and what procedures have been put in place by his Department to monitor the environmental impacts arising from the implementation of the paper. [29491]

Mr. Clappison: The consultation paper is about customer choice between suppliers of drinking water. Inter alia, possible environmental aspects were taken into account in developing the proposals; they take for granted that there would be no change in the environmental standards and performance required—that is, with respect to abstraction requirements and the handling of wastes arising in the treatment process—see in particular paragraphs 4.34 and 4.36.

Biodiversity

Ms Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will publish the environmental appraisal conducted in accordance with guidance contained in "Policy Appraisal and the Environment" for the forthcoming Government response to the report of the United Kingdom biodiversity steering group. [29492]

Mr. Clappison: The United Kingdom steering group took account of the guidance set out in the booklet, "Policy Appraisal and the Environment", in preparing the costed action plans for key species and habitats contained in the group's report. The Government's response to the report, published on 15 May 1996, accepts the order of costs involved as a best estimate at this time by leading scientists and economists in this field. As more detailed implementation plans are drawn up the costs and benefits may well become clearer. If these differ significantly from the group's estimates, they will be referred to the UK biodiversity group.

Planning and Telecommunications

Ms Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when the planning and telecommunications consultation paper was subject to an environmental appraisal using the guidance contained in "Policy Appraisal and the Environment"; if he will publish the appraisal; what alternative courses of action from those set out in the planning and telecommunications consultation paper were considered in the environmental appraisal; how the paper was modified following the appraisal; and what procedures have been put in place by his Department to monitor the environmental impacts arising from the implementation of the paper. [29493]

Sir Paul Beresford: Our consultation paper, "Planning and Telecommuncations", seeks views on whether a general planning permission should be granted for certain kinds of telecommunications development. The potential environmental impact was considered in drawing up the paper although a full environmental assessment was not judged appropriate. Likely environmental implications will be fully taken into account in the formulation of any new policies, in the light of responses to the consultation. We are not proposing special arrangements to monitor the impact of any new legislation arising from this consultation exercise but this will be kept under a review in the normal way.

Waste Management

Ms Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when the waste management regulations were subject to an environmental appraisal using the guidance contained in "Policy Appraisal and the Environment"; if he will publish the appraisal; what alternative courses of action from those set out in the waste management regulations were considered in the appraisal; how the regulations were modified by the results of the appraisal; and what procedures have been

put in place by his Department to monitor the environmental impacts arising from the implementation of the regulations. [29494]

Mr. Clappison: The main purpose of the Waste Management Licensing Regulations 1994 is to transpose into national law the requirements of the amended EC framework directive on waste. In view of the objectives and requirements of the directive, a separate environmental appraisal in relation to the 1994 regulations would not have been appropriate.

The Environment Agency is a competent authority for the purpose of the regulations and has a duty under section 42 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 to ensure that licensed activities do not cause environmental pollution or harm to human health.

Durham Chemicals, Birtley

Mr. McWilliam: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment (1) if he will make a statement on the report by the Environment Agency concerning the release of chlorine gas by Durham Chemicals in Birtley on 17 April; [29585]

(2) if he will make a statement regarding his power to insist that where poison gas is released, the local authorities environmental health department and local health authority must be informed, with special reference to the incident at Durham Chemicals on 17 April; [29586]

(3) if he will give an instruction to the director of the Environment Agency to ensure that all companies manufacturing hazardous chemicals in the United Kingdom are aware of their duty to report immediately a leak of those chemicals to the Environment Agency and to the local authority environmental health committee. [29590]

Mr. Clappison: The Environment Agency learnt on 24 April that there had been an unauthorised release of chlorine gas from the Durham Chemicals process. The agency promptly investigated the incident, which had occurred on 17 April, and as a result of its findings, issued an enforcement notice to Harcros Chemical UK Ltd. the operator of the process, on 2 May. The notice states that conditions of the company's integrated pollution control—IPC—authorisation were breached by the operator's failure to report the release to the agency within 24 hours of its occurrence, the failure to provide adequate supervision of staff and the failure to follow written operating instructions. There was a regrettable delay in discussing the incident with officers of Gateshead metropolitan borough council, but the agency is now in discussion with both officers and councillors, and with the Health and Safety Executive, which regulates the site under the Control of Industrial Major Accident Hazards Regulations 1984. The agency is reviewing the options for further enforcement, including prosecution.

The Environment Agency routinely includes in its IPC authorisations a condition requiring operators to report any unauthorised release within 24 hours of its occurrence. The Secretary of State considers that such conditions are essential. In the event of any serious incident at an IPC process which is likely to give rise to significant local public concern, he would also expect that the agency would inform interested bodies such as the local authority and, where there are implications for public health, the local health authority.

Integrated Regional Offices

Mr. Byers: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what were the (i) running costs and (ii) number of staff employed for each integrated regional office in 1995–96. [29662]

Sir Paul Beresford: The information is as follows:

Government office	*Running costs (forecast outturn 1995–96) (k)*	*Number of staff employed on 1 October 1995*
North East	8,918	297
North West	9,984	323
Yorkshire and Humberside	9,125	318
Merseyside	4,746	169
West Midlands	10,500	326
East Midlands	7,125	233
Eastern	6,137	184
South West	7,666	251
South East	8,348	220
London	11,065	323

Waste Disposal

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what information is made available by the Government on the disposal of urban waste water and sludge. [30110]

Mr. Robert B. Jones: Environment Ministers have today issued a leaflet on sewage collection, treatment and disposal in the United Kingdom. The leaflet is in the Department of the Environment series of "One World" information sheets. It describes on-going and major new initiatives on sewage treatment in the UK, and the investment programme which is involved, in order to ensure that we safeguard and build on our successes in protecting and improving the water environment.

The UK's extensive and effective systems for the continuous collection and treatment of sewage play an essential part in the management and improvement programmes, promoted by our pollution control authorities, for our inland and coastal waters. The £9,000 million investments by the UK water industry since 1989 on sewage collection and treatment services have made significant contribution to improvements in our inland and coastal waters. For example, between 1990 and 1994 there has been a net upgrading of over 26 per cent. of the total length of rivers and canals surveyed in England and Wales.

The leaflet is being disseminated to the public in the UK through local authorities and libraries and the relevant pollution control authorities.

I am placing copies of the leaflet in the House Library.

Council Tax

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what was the band D council tax levied in respect of each of the English police authorities in 1995–96 and 1996–97; and if he will indicate the percentage increase in each case. [29589]

Sir Paul Beresford: The information requested is as follows:

	1995–96 £	1996–97 £	Percentage increase
Receiver for the Metropolitan Police	54.08	56.01	3.6
Greater Manchester Police	45.53	45.86	0.7
Merseyside Police	53.42	57.87	8.3
South Yorkshire Police	44.95	45.80	1.9
Northumbria Police	44.92	45.95	2.3
West Midlands Police	44.48	45.65	2.6
West Yorkshire Police	45.28	45.28	0.0
Avon and Somerset Police	45.32	45.73	0.9
Devon and Cornwall Police	45.60	45.66	0.1
Hampshire Police	45.00	45.81	1.8
Sussex Police	45.18	45.99	1.8
Thames Valley Police	46.86	46.96	0.2
West Mercia Police	44.94	45.34	0.9
Bedfordshire Police	45.40	46.46	2.3
Cambridgeshire Police	44.64	45.00	0.8
Cheshire Police	44.71	45.10	0.9
Cleveland Police	45.23	46.02	1.7
Cumbria Police	49.54	51.14	3.2
Derbyshire Police	45.04	45.18	0.3
Dorset Police	56.13	57.49	2.4
Durham Police	45.00	45.45	1.0
Essex Police	47.25	48.42	2.5
Gloucestershire Police	44.92	44.96	0.1
Hertfordshire Police	44.89	46.02	2.5
Humberside Police	45.09	45.72	1.4
Kent Police	45.09	45.81	1.6
Lancashire Police	45.18	45.71	1.2
Leicestershire Police	45.27	45.32	0.1
Lincolnshire Police	62.21	66.96	7.6
Norfolk Police	45.27	44.82	–1.0
Northamptonshire Police	63.29	64.26	1.5
North Yorkshire Police	45.47	45.34	–0.3
Nottinghamshire Police	45.51	45.94	0.9
Staffordshire Police	47.87	48.15	0.6
Suffolk Police	44.64	45.09	1.0
Surrey Police	41.94	42.93	2.4
Warwickshire Police	44.60	46.70	4.7
Wiltshire Police	48.45	49.44	2.0

Waste Shipments

Mr. Thomason: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what is his policy in relation to shipments of waste into and out of the United Kingdom. [30021]

Mr. Clappison: The Government's policies are set out in the "United Kingdom Management Plan for Exports and Imports of Waste", which is published today, and comes into operation on 1 June 1996.

Under the plan, which is legally binding throughout the United Kingdom, all exports of waste for disposal are banned, as are most imports for disposal other than in exceptional cases where wider environmental considerations apply. Exports of water for recovery to countries within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development may continue but, subject to limited exceptions, exports of hazardous waste for recovery to non-OECD countries are banned. Imports of waste for genuine recovery operations may continue.

The Government's policy proposals for waste exports and imports were initially outlined in a statement by my right hon. Friend, the Member for South Ribble (Mr. Atkins), who was then Minister for the Environment and Countryside, on 15 June 1994. The Department consulted on a draft document during February and March 1995; some 750 copies were dispatched, and 73 responses were received from industry, waste regulators and members of the public. Copies of non-confidential responses have been placed in my Department's library. The final text of the plan incorporates various changes to meet the concerns and interests of those consulted.

A compliance cost assessment has been undertaken in relation to the plan. Copies of both the plan and the compliance cost assessment have been placed in the Library.

The plan provides the means to implement the Government's long-standing policy of self-sufficiency in waste disposal, while preserving legitimate trade in wastes moving for recovery. It also takes account of the United Kingdom's international obligations, in particular under the Basel convention on the control of transboundary movements of hazardous wastes and their disposal.

Radon

Mr. David Nicholson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when the National Radiological Protection Board will be publishing the results of its mapping exercise to identify the areas of England with High radon levels. [30148]

Mr. Gummer: In January, we announced that the National Radiological Protection Board report on radon would be published later in the year. That report was published this morning. Copies of it have been provided to the Library of the House. The Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) has written to hon. Members with a direct interest enclosing a comprehensive briefing pack. Copies have also been sent to affected local authorities.

Housing Purchase Grant

Ms Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment when the consultation paper on proposed rural exemptions from the purchase grant scheme for housing association tenants was subject to an environmental appraisal using the guidance contained in "Policy Appraisal and the Environment"; if he will publish the appraisal; what alternative courses of action from those set out in the paper were considered in the environmental appraisal; how the paper was modified by the results of the appraisal; and what procedures have been put in place by his Department to monitor the environmental impacts arising from the implementation of the paper. [29499]

Mr. Clappison: The new purchase grant scheme will extend the chance of home ownership to more housing associations tenants, allowing them to buy their own home at a discount. The consultation paper on proposed rural exemptions contains proposals to exclude small rural settlements with a population of 3,000 or fewer from the scheme. Housing association tenants living in those settlements would not have the right to buy their homes. As such exclusions will not have any environmental consequences, an environmental appraisal was not appropriate.

DEFENCE

Ammunition

Mr. King: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he intends to place a contract for 81 mm ammunition; and if he will make a statement. [29761]

Mr. Arbuthnot: I am pleased to announce that we have decided, subject to the satisfactory completion of negotiations, to award two contracts to Royal Ordnance, a division of British Aerospace Defence Ltd., for the supply of five years' worth of 81mm mortar ammunition. The requirement is for the high explosive and smoke rounds for the 81mm mortar in service with the British Army. The total value of the two contracts is approximately £80 million.

The high explosive round contract was won by Royal Ordnance in the face of competition from other UK firms and overseas suppliers. The contract for the smoke round will be placed with Royal Ordnance, as the producers of the only approved product to meet this requirement, subject to the satisfactory completion of price negotiations.

A number of Royal Ordnance factories will benefit from these orders, in particular the factory at Glascoed, Gwent which will undertake the filling and assembly of the high explosive rounds. Significant work packages are also expected to go to RO factories at Birtley, Radway Green and Bridgwater. The orders should help maintain up to 400 jobs at Royal Ordnance sites and its UK sub-contractors for the duration of the contracts.

Jaguar Project

Mr. Spellar: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the estimated costs of the Jaguar thermal imaging airborne laser designator update; and what evaluation his Department has made of the contract process for this project. [29224]

Mr. Arbuthnot: The estimated cost of the initial programme upgrade 12 Jaguar aircraft was of the order of £13 million. The contracting process employed for this and all other procurement projects is decided only after careful consideration and evaluation of all relevant factors.

Departmental Works of Art

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many of his Department's works of art are classified as stolen. [29403]

Mr. Arbuthnot: Six works of art belonging to my Department have been reported as stolen.

Defence Clothing and Textiles Agency

Mr. Legg: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about the Defence Clothing and Textiles Agency for 1996–97. [30022]

Mr. Soames: The chief executive of the Defence Clothing and Textiles Agency has been set the following key targets for 1996–97:

(1) To achieve a minimum availability of 80 per cent. across the agency commodity ranges.

(2) To ensure that 80 per cent. of research and development milestones are met by the due date and within budget.

(3) To ensure that 90 per cent. of procurement milestones are met for key items, and 80 per cent. of procurement milestones are met for other items, so that total planned time is achieved from initiation of requirement to delivery.

(4) To ensure that expenditure is managed to within 2.5 per cent. of budget.

(5) To ensure that 80 per cent. satisfaction rate is achieved on customer surveys.

These key targets take forward much of the work of the previous targets as set out in the agency's first documents, and it is hoped that the collocation of the agency will drive the rationalisation and reform activities which are essential to the DCTA business plan. Given all the other pressures on the agency, including downward financial pressure, I believe they are challenging but achievable. Copies of the agency's new framework document will be placed in the Library of the House.

Royal Air Force

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the projected strength of the RAF on 1 April 2000. [29645]

Mr. Soames: The estimated strength of the RAF on 1 April 2000 is around 55,500. This figure includes an element for personnel undergoing training.

Civilian Contractors

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to use civilian contractors in front-line operations. [29647]

Mr. Soames: We have no such plans. Our aim is to maintain the effectiveness and operational capability of our armed forces. To that end, we seek to concentrate resources on the front line, providing support to the armed forces in ways which ensure long-term value for money, and utilising the skills and resources of the commercial sector wherever this makes operational and economic sense.

Merchant Vessels

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Ukrainian registered merchant vessels his Department has chartered in the current year. [29649]

Mr. Soames: My Department has chartered one Ukrainian registered vessel to date in 1996. The vessel has undertaken two separate charters.

Armed Forces (Strength)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the total service strength of the armed forces at 1 April 1990; and what is the projected strength at 1 April 2000. [29653]

Mr. Soames: The total service strength of the regular armed forces at 1 April 1990 was 314,700. The estimated strength at 1 April 2000 is 213,500. Both figures include Gurkha strengths, Royal Marines and Queen Alexandra Royal Naval Nursing Service, and an element for personnel undergoing training. The former excludes the

then Ulster Defence Regiment and the latter excludes the Royal Irish Regiment (Home Service Force).

Armed Forces (Deaths)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many deaths there have been among members of the armed forces since January 1991. [29646]

Mr. Soames: Since January 1991, the total number of deaths of serving personnel in the armed forces is 1,233.

Merchant Ships

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the names and country of registration of all merchant ships chartered by his Department for Operation Purple Star. [29650]

Mr. Soames: The names and countries of registration of ships chartered for Exercise Purple Star is as follows:

Prince of Scandinavia: Danish
Dan Hafnia: Danish
Condock 3: German
Condock V: German
Kidira: Bahamian
Kapitan Mezentsyev: Ukrainian
Arcade Eagle: Norwegian
Arcade Falcon: Norwegian
Norcliff: Norwegian
Chodziez: Polish
Sochi: Maltese.

Suicides

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many members of the armed forces have committed suicide since 1991. [29652]

Mr. Soames: Since January 1991, the total number of suicides by serving personnel in the armed forces is 135.

Kapitan Mezentsyev

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when his Department chartered the Ukrainian merchant vessel, Kapitan Mezentsyev; what checks his Department made to ensure that it would meet American safety standards; when it was impounded by the American authorities; what were the reasons given by the American authorities for the impounding; what discussions his Department has had with the US authorities; if his Department has chartered a replacement vessel for Operation Purple Star; and who is financially responsible for the Kapitan Mezentsyev during Operation Purple Star. [29651]

Mr. Soames: The Kapitan Mezentsyev was chartered on 12 March 1996 on the basis that she complied fully with international port state control standards. She has passed an internationally recognised safety inspection carried out by the Dutch authorities in Flushing on 24 January. She was examined by my Department's marine superintendents on 8–9 April when she reported for loading. No serious defects were noted, and all her safety documentation was found to be in order.

The vessel was impounded on 22 April following a US port state control inspection, which identified a number of minor defects. These were subsequently remedied and, following a further inspection, the Kapitan Mezentsyev was released on 4 May. My Department naturally kept in close touch with the US authorities during the period when the vessel was confined to port.

The vessel was contracted to my Department for the purpose of transporting equipment to the US, and return, for Exercise Purple Star. The contract included a clause requiring the vessel to comply with US marine legislation. No charter fees were therefore attracted during the period she was impounded. Financial responsibility for effecting the repairs needed to satisfy the US authorities lies, of course, with the owners. There was no requirement to charter a replacement vessel.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Business Closures

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many businesses in Northern Ireland have ceased trading *(a)* voluntarily and *(b)* involuntarily in each of the past five years. [28589]

Mr. Ancram: The following information relates to companies for the period 1 April 1990 to 31 March 1995. The companies and insolvency report for the year ended 31 March 1995 contains further data and is available in the Library of the House.

	Companies which commenced winding up proceedings				*Companies struck off the companies register*
Year to 31 March	*Members voluntary*	*Creditors voluntary*	*Court (Compulsory)*	*Total*	
1991	58	57	77	192	647
1992	57	69	100	226	787
1993	51	82	85	218	678
1994	50	76	74	200	522
1995	51	50	75	176	489

These figures do not include unregistered businesses which ceased trading voluntarily or involuntarily.

Brain Search Facilities

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the *(a)* centres and *(b)* hospitals which provide minute brain search facilities; and if he will make a statement. [28636]

Mr. Moss: In Northern Ireland, all Health and Social Services trusts with acute hospital facilities are able to access neurological services. Regional neurosurgical services are provided by the Royal Group of Hospitals trust, Belfast. Further information can be obtained from the relevant chief executives.

Social Security Agency Customers

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many Social Security Agency customers in receipt of unemployment benefit or income support in Northern Ireland currently sign on by post by reason of the distance of their place of residence from their local social security office; how many of these will be required to sign on and be interviewed in person after the introduction of the jobseeker's allowance at each social security office in Northern Ireland; if they will be provided with a travel warrant to cover the cost of a return journey between their place of residence and their local social security office; and how many additional client adviser posts will be created in each social security office to advise and help job seekers. [29143]

Mr. Moss: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Social Security Agency under its chief executive, Mr. Alec Wylie. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Alec Wylie to Mr. Roy Beggs, dated 15 May 1996:

I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question on Jobseeker's Allowance.

There are 20,781 customers in receipt of Unemployment Benefit or Income Support in Northern Ireland who currently sign on by post because of the distance of their place of residence from their local Social Security Office. Some 10,000 of these customers will be required to sign in person and be interviewed when Jobseeker's Allowance is introduced on 7 October 1996. After this date the criteria for postal signing will be revised whereby the jobseeker's journey from home to office or return would have to exceed one hour or their attendance would have to result in an overall absence from home (due to the infrequency of public transport) in excess of four hours. Any jobseeker who has a physical or mental disability which restricts their mobility would also be able to sign by post.

As is the case for all other jobseekers required to attend their local social security office on a regular basis, there will be no provision to meet the cost of travel. Travel expenses are only paid when a jobseeker has been requested to attend their local social security office on a day other than their signing day.

The staffing complement in the local Social Security Offices is presently being considered but it is estimated that the existing client adviser complement will be increased by 114 posts.

I hope this explains the position for you but I would be happy to provide any further information you require.

Inward Investors (Visits)

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list by constituency the number of *(a)* first visits and *(b)* repeat visits by potential inward investors and industrialists to Northern Ireland during the period 1 April 1995 to 31 March 1996. [28979]

Sir John Wheeler: This information is not available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. Information on visits to Northern Ireland by potential investors and industrialists is recorded by district council area. A breakdown, on this basis, for the period requested is attached.

First and repeat visits to Northern Ireland—1 April 1995 to 31 March 1996

District council	*[1]Potential investors*		*[2]Industrialists*	
	First	*Repeat*	*First*	*Repeat*
Antrim	13	10	8	—
Ards	1	2	4	—
Armagh	—	1	—	—
Ballymena	2	1	4	—
Ballymoney	1	—	—	—
Banbridge	2	1	—	—
Belfast	117	75	19	—
Carrick	5	2	9	1
Castlereagh	7	2	13	1
Coleraine	1	2	4	—
Cookstown	6	10	—	—
Craigavon	15	2	—	1
Derry	23	10	4	—
Down	2	2	—	—
Dungannon	3	6	4	1
Fermanagh	5	7	4	—
Larne	2	1	5	1
Limavady	0	2	—	—
Lisburn	27	18	—	—
Magherafelt	—	4	—	1
Moyle	—	—	—	—
Newry and Mourne	12	6	—	—
Newtownabbey	15	9	17	2
North Down	9	4	3	1

First and repeat visits to Northern Ireland—1 April 1995 to 31 March 1996

District council	[1]*Potential investors*		[2]*Industrialists*	
	First	*Repeat*	*First*	*Repeat*
Omagh	2	4	—	—
Strabane	4	7	—	—
Total	274	188	98	9

[1] Potential Investors are defined as companies which visited Northern Ireland as a potential location for a mobile investment project.
[2] Industrialists are defined as companies which have visited Northern Ireland on a general fact finding basis, not related to a specific investment project—for example, inward missions from the Invest in Britain Bureau.

TREASURY

Taxation

12. **Mr. Riddick:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to alter the rates of tax for people who earn more than £34,000 per annum. [28501]

Mr. Jack: My right hon and learned Friend the Chancellor will announce any of his taxation proposals in November.

Late Payments

14. **Mr. Dowd:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to deal with the problems caused to small businesses by late payment of invoices. [28503]

Mrs. Angela Knight: The Government have implemented a number of measures to tackle late payment, including improving Government Departments' payment performance, requiring large companies to state their payment policies in their annual reports, developing a British standard for prompt payment and improving court procedures for debt recovery.

Tax Cuts

16. **Mr. Mullin:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has for tax cuts; and if he will make a statement. [28505]

Mr. Jack: The Government are committed to a low-taxation economy and will cut taxes when it is right for the economy to do so.

Gross Domestic Product

17. **Mr. Alan W. Williams:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the rate of growth of GDP *(a)* in the last quarter and *(b)* in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [28506]

Mr. Waldegrave: The economy continues to grow steadily. In the first quarter of 1996, it is estimated that GDP was 0.4 per cent. higher than in the previous quarter, and 2.0 per cent. up on a year earlier.

Public Sector Borrowing Requirement

18. **Mr. Skinner:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the latest estimate of the PSBR for 1996–97 and 1997–98. [28507]

Mr. Waldegrave: The Budget forecast of the PSBR was £22½ billion in 1996–97 and £15 billion in 1997–98. An updated forecast of the PSBR will be published in the summer economic forecast on the 9 July.

27. **Mr. Morgan:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proposals he has to improve the accuracy of forecasts of the public sector borrowing requirement. [28516]

Mr. Waldegrave: Treasury forecasters, and the tax forecasters in the Inland Revenue and Customs and Exercise, are always looking for way to improve the accuracy of their forecasts.

Unemployment

19. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what were *(a)* the highest and *(b)* the lowest levels of unemployment recorded in the period of each Parliament since 1979. [28508]

Mrs. Angela Knight: Figures for claimant unemployment are:

Million

Parliament	*Highest*	*Lowest*
May 1979 to May 1983	2.78	1.04
June 1983 to May 1987	3.12	2.80
June 1987 to March 1992	2.84	1.59
May 1992	2.98	2.18

Privatisation (Debt)

20. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much debt has been written off by the Government since 1979 in those industries and organisations that have been privatised. [28509]

Mr. Jack: In cash terms, the amount of debt written off in companies privatised since 1979 is £16.24 billion, but £9.73 billion of new debt was also injected.

Income Tax

22. **Mr. Hawkins:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what income tax rates were *(a)* in 1978 and *(b)* in 1995; and what plans he has for further reduction in income tax. [28511]

Mr. Jack: In 1978–79, the first £750 of taxable income was taxed at 24 per cent. and the next £7,250 at the basic rate of 33 per cent. There were nine higher rates of tax, beginning at 40 per cent. and culminating in a rate of 83 per cent. on taxable income over £24,000.

In 1996–97, the first £3,900 of taxable income is taxed at 20 per cent., and the next £25,500 is taxed at the basic rate of 24 per cent. All income above this level is taxed at a single higher rate of 40 per cent. It is our intention to reduce tax rates when it is right for the economy. My right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor will announce his plans for taxation in November.

Economic Forecasts

23. **Mr. David Atkinson:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his current forecasts for the principal economic indication over the medium term. [28512]

Mr. Waldegrave: Illustrative projections for economic growth and inflation over the medium term are given in table 3.9 of the 1996–97 "Financial Statement and Budget Report", which show output growing at a rate of 2¾ per cent. to 3 per cent., whilst underlying inflation falls to 2 per cent.

Veteran and Classic Vehicles

24. **Mr. Robert G. Hughes:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many veteran and classic vehicles over 25 years old have been relieved from vehicle excise duty under the provisions of the Finance Act 1996. [28513]

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: An estimated 166,000 veteran and classic vehicles over 25 years old were exempted from vehicle excise duty by the Finance Act 1996.

Government Borrowing

25. **Mr. Tony Banks:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the level of Government borrowing next year. [28514]

Mr. Waldegrave: The Budget projection of the 1997–98 public sector borrowing requirement was £15 billion.

Private Finance Initiative

26. **Sir Sydney Chapman:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will report progress on the private finance initiative. [28515]

Mr. Jack: Some £4.76 billion of agreed private finance initiative deals were announced in 1995–96, and a further £300 million were at preferred bidder stage. The total of agreed, announced projects has now risen to £4.92 billion with the announcement of a preferred bidder for the Croydon tramlink project. More than £300 million more of deals are due to be agreed in the next few weeks.

On 3 April, I announced the publication of new procurement guidelines, to smooth the procurement process, with case studies of two prisons built under the PFI. To assist further the development of the private finance initiative, a training course was introduced last in January. So far, nearly 1,400 civil servants have either received training or are committed to attend future courses.

Telecommunication Charges

28. **Mr. Congdon:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the economic benefits of reduced telecommunication charges. [28517]

Mr. Jack: The Treasury has not carried out a detailed study of the effect of lower telecommunications prices on the UK economy. However, I would expect the very substantial falls in prices since privatisation—they are down some 40 per cent. in real terms—to have provided significant economic benefits to businesses and their competitiveness, particularly those for whom communication is a key element. The UK is now one of the cheapest countries in the world in which to make telephone calls, and UK charges and the cheapest in Europe, thus reaffirming our own economic competitiveness.

Retail Prices Index

Mr. David Evans: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he made about including green peppers in the retail prices index and the contribution they make to monitoring price inflation in the United Kingdom. [28504]

Mrs. Angela Knight: This year, green peppers were included for the first time in the list of goods covered by the retail prices index—RPI. The Office for National Statistics—ONS—updates this list every year to reflect changing consumer patterns. All fresh vegetables, including green peppers, account for only 0.7 per cent. in the RPI.

Living Standards

Mr. Michael Brown: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the annual change in average United Kingdom living standards for each year since 1966. [28510]

Mr. Jack: Real personal disposable income per head increased by 90 per cent. over the period 1966 to 1995, an annual rate of growth of 2.2 per cent.

Transfer Pricing Practices

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the tax revenues lost as a result of transfer pricing practices by multinational companies in the last five tax years. [27345]

Mr. Jack: The Inland Revenue devotes significant resources to ensuring that the transfer pricing legislation is complied with, and any evidence of non-compliance is carefully investigated. Over the past five tax years, the estimated total tax from inquiries made by the specialist section at the Inland Revenue which deals with the largest cases with international aspects, including transfer pricing, was £793 million. This does not include additional tax arising from work in the Inland Revenue's local offices or at the oil taxation office, separate records of which are not kept but which would significantly increase the total. It is not possible to estimate the amount of tax revenue lost through any failures to follow the transfer pricing legislation of which the Inland Revenue has not become aware. The United Kingdom regards transfer pricing as a very significant aspect of international taxation and the Inland Revenue is consistently on the alert for failures to comply with the legislation.

Computer Systems

Mr. Redmond: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the savings to date which the Inland Revenue has made from out-sourcing arrangements with the SHL software computer system, compared with the use of in-house services; and if he will make a statement. [29529]

Mr. Jack: The Inland Revenue does not have an out-sourcing arrangement with the SHL software computer system.

Post Office

Mr. Khabra: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he last met the chairman of the Post Office to discuss the Post Office's external financing limit. [28755]

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: I have not met the chairman of the Post Office to discuss the Post Office's external financing limit.

Customs and Excise Risk Information System

Ms Primarolo: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the Customs and Excise risk information system. [29516]

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory *[holding answer 15 May 1996]:* Customs tells me that this is an integrated risk information system that would eventually assess risk across the whole of a trader's activities in relation to those duties and taxes for which Customs is responsible. It has conducted a feasibility study and is working on the first stage of building a simple prototype that brings together existing risk information to inform better the targeting of local assurance activity.

Value Added Tax

Ms Primarolo: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will estimate the impact on VAT revenues of the recent reductions in *(a)* value added tax staff in his Department and *(b)* the number of assurance visits made by value added tax staff; [29517]

(2) if he will estimate the percentage reduction which will take place in the number of standard VAT inspections, following staff reductions in Customs and Excise resulting from the fundamental expenditure review. [29522]

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory *[holding answers 15 May 1996]:* Customs and Excise aims to improve its effectiveness by replacing some VAT visits with alternative means of gaining assurance and targeting the remaining visits better in relation to risks. This will enable it to reduce staffing levels while maintaining or improving outputs. The precise reduction in visiting which can be achieved will depend on the outcome of trials, which are currently taking place and will be evaluated during the coming year.

We do not expect the changes made this year to affect VAT revenues.

Ms Primarolo: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the latest available figures for *(a)* under-declarations and *(b)* over-declarations of tax detected by value added tax assurance officers. [29518]

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory *[holding answer 15 May 1996]:* The latest available full-year figures are for 1994–95 and total *(a)* £3,286 million in under-declarations and *(b)* £1,146 million in over-declarations identified by officers.

Ms Primarolo: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the additional revenue collected annually as a result of assurance visits by VAT officers. [29523]

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory *[holding answer 15 May 1996]:* The additional revenue identified by officers in 1994–95 was £2,140 million.

Ms Primarolo: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make it a charter commitment for a VAT officer to visit all newly registered businesses within three years of registration. [29524]

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory *[holding answer 15 May 1996]:* Customs has recently published a revised charter standard, which includes a commitment to offer to every newly registering business a choice of options to learn about how VAT works.

This provides timely advice, tailored to business needs, and replaces the commitment to visit within three years.

Ms Primarolo: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the annual amount of VAT evaded or undeclared; and if he will make a statement. [29525]

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory *[holding answer 15 May 1996]:* In an average year, HM Customs and Excise investigates about 1,100 cases for fraudulent evasion of VAT, involving total arrears of approximately £60 million. About 1,502 are dealt with through criminal procedures, and about 950 are dealt with using the civil investigation route. Financial penalties of approximately £8 million per annum are applied. About 100 custodial years per annum are imposed by the courts.

It is not possible to quantify the level of fraud that goes undetected, but by its nature the detection of a fraud prevents further evasion. We estimate the total annual amount of evasion prevented as a result of the investigation effort to be in the region of £200 million, including arrears.

In addition, about £2.5 billion of net under declarations is identified, mainly through risk-based auditing of businesses' accounts.

Ms Primarolo: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much VAT has been reclaimed by people leaving the country who have bought goods in the UK, in each of the last five years. [29526]

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory *[holding answer 15 May 1996]:* No records are maintained of tax-free sales to entitled persons. Doing so would have resource implications for Customs and Excise and would impose an unacceptable burden on retailers who would be required to keep additional records and submit returns.

Tax Office Closures

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many tax offices *(a)* have been closed in 1995–96 and *(b)* will be closed in 1996–97; if he will list such offices; and if he will make a statement. [29663]

Mr. Jack: The Inland Revenue is engaged in a programme to reorganise the structure of all local tax and collection offices to ensure that the right operational framework is in place to deliver its future business objectives.

Seventy-three tax offices and 22 collection offices were reorganised and merged in 1995–96 to form 38 new-style offices. Most of the mergers involve offices in London or the same provincial city or town. Outside those locations te tax offices in Guildford, Havant, Rotherham and Poole were closed during 1995–96 and merged with new-style offices created in a nearby city or town.

On the basis of the present approved programme, 67 tax offices and 17 collection offices will be reorganised and merged in 1996–97 to form a further 38 new-style offices. The programme includes closure of the tax offices in Bexhill, Bexleyheath, Bognor Regis, Dartford, Ely, Greenwich, Neath and Solihull during 1996–97.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Crown Prosecution Service

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Attorney-General at what date the Crown Prosecution Service learnt of the verdicts of unlawful killing in respect of *(a)* Richard O'Brien and *(b)* Shiji Lapite; and when in each case the Crown Prosecution Service expects to reach a decision whether to prosecute. [28717]

The Attorney-General: Evidence gathered during the police investigation into the death of Richard O'Brien was reviewed by the Crown Prosecution Service. On 30 January 1995, it was concluded that there was insufficient evidence to provide a realistic prospect of conviction for any offence of homicide. The Crown Prosecution Service learnt of the verdict of unlawful killing in respect of Richard O'Brien on 10 November 1995. The Crown Prosecution Service has requested transcripts of the evidence given at the inquest and some of the material was received on 4 and 22 April 1996. Once the transcripts have been received they will be carefully considered together with the evidence available prior to the inquest and, subject to any further enquiries that may prove necessary, the Crown Prosecution Service will then decide whether or not the evidence is now sufficient to justify proceedings.

On 18 July 1995, the Crown Prosecution Service advised the police that the then available evidence was insufficient to provide a realistic prospect of conviction of any person for homicide arising from the death of Shiji Lapite. The Crown Prosecution Service learnt of the verdict of unlawful killing in respect of Mr. Shiji Lapite on 26 January 1996. All the transcripts of evidence and copies of documents produced to the inquest jury were received by 18 March 1996. This material is being considered together with the evidence available prior to the inquest and once this has been done the Crown Prosecution Service will decide whether or not the evidence is now sufficient to justify proceedings.

SCOTLAND

Health Service (Acute Bed Strategy)

Mr. Galbraith: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland which *(a)* individuals and *(b)* organisations representing (i) doctors and (ii) nurses have been consulted in the acute bed strategy review. [28166]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: As part of the review, the views of all health boards and NHS trusts in Scotland were invited. In addition, it was made clear that comments would be welcomed from any other individuals or organisations who wished to offer views.

In order to obtain the views of doctors, nurses and other clinical professions, specific consultation was undertaken with:

The British Medical Association

The Scottish Committee of the Royal Colleges

The Royal College of Physicians Edinburgh

The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow

The Royal College of Surgeons Edinburgh

The Scottish Joint Consultants Committee

The National Professional Advisory Committees' Liaison Committee.

Control of Advertisements

Mr. Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the implementation of circular 10/1984, part II, clause 17 on outdoor advertisements; and if he will make a statement. [28329]

Mr. Kynoch: No formal assessment has been made. My right hon. Friend considers that the guidance contained in Scottish Development Department circular 10/1984, including that in paragraph 17 remains appropriate. However, as part of the wider review of the planning system in Scotland, my Department is currently reviewing the Town and Country Planning (Control of Advertisements) (Scotland) Regulations 1984. A consultation paper will be issued shortly setting out proposals for change to improve the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the advertisements regime.

Water Fluoridation

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what recent instructions or guidance his Department has issued to Scotland's *(a)* health boards *(b)* water authorities relating to the fluoridation of public water supplies. [28614]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Guidance about the procedural and technical aspects of schemes to fluoridate the public water supplies was issued to health boards and water authorities in June 1991. The "Oral Health Strategy for Scotland", which was published in December 1995, described the changes introduced by the Local Government etc. (Scotland) Act 1994. I have arranged for copies of these documents to be placed in the Library.

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has received from (i) Scottish health boards and (ii) Scotland's water authorities during the last 18 months relating to the fluoridation of public water supplies. [28611]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: None.

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what research his Department has carried out into the fluoridation of public water supplies and the benefits and disadvantages of this policy. [28619]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Although no specific research has been carried out by the Scottish Office, the extensive research undertaken over many years in the United Kingdom and elsewhere has helped inform our view that fluoridation of the public water supplies constitutes a safe and effective means of reducing tooth decay.

Pressmennan Wood

Mr. Home Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the Forestry Commission's policies for the protection of old native woodlands; and if he will call for a report on the application for a felling licence for oak trees in Pressmennan wood. [28713]

Mr. Kynoch: We are committed to protecting our ancient and semi-natural woodlands, the most important of which have been designated as national nature reserves and sites of special scientific interest.

The Forestry Commission is currently considering an application for tree felling and replanting in Pressmennan wood. The commission has consulted Scottish Natural Heritage and East Lothian district council over the proposals, and will take account of the comments it receives from these bodies and any other organisations and individuals before making a decision on the application.

GP Fundholding (Howie Report)

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what action his Department has taken in respect of the report on general practitioners fundholding produced by Dr. John Howie; if this report has been circulated to Scotland's health boards; and if his Department is now undertaking additional research on this issue. [28616]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The Department has considered the conclusions of the report and has instigated further work on the development of weighted capitation budget setting.

The report has not been formally issued to health boards, but was launched at a conference in March 1995, attended by around 100 invited participants representing primary care, policy making and research interests in the health service in Scotland.

Additional work, in the form of a national evaluation of total purchasing, which is a development of fundholding, is being undertaken as a joint project between the Departments of Health in England and Wales, and in Scotland.

Concessionary Travel

Mr. Foulkes: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) if he will estimate the cost of complying with the Atkins *v.* Wrekin district council and Department of Transport decision by the advocate general of the European Court of Justice *(a)* in the current financial year, *(b)* in future years and *(c)* for each year between 1984 and 1995; [28984]

(2) if men who are or have been aged 60 to 65 years since December 1984 will be able to claim compensation from their local authority as a result of the Atkins *v.* Wrekin district council and Department of Transport case considered by the European Court. [28985]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The European Court of Justice has not yet given its judgment in the Atkins case. It is not appropriate to speculate as to the implications of the outcome.

Scottish Homes

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) how much Scottish Homes spent in each operational district on establishing and supporting the work of housing associations in each financial year since April 1989 and from April to December 1995; [28962]

(2) how many housing associations have received financial support from Scottish Homes since April 1989; how many of these housing associations have had tenancies transferred to them by Scottish Homes; and if he will list these associations, the number of tenancies which have been transferred to them by Scottish Homes and the amount which Scottish Homes has spent on supporting the work of each of these associations. [28983]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson: The information requested is a matter for Scottish Homes. I have asked the chairman, Mr. John Ward, to write to the hon. Member with the relevant information.

Students

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement indicating what funds his Department operates to alleviate hardship among Scottish students. [28966]

Mr. Raymond S. Robertson: I assume that the hon. Member is referring to the access funds which we introduced in Session 1990–91 as part of the wider changes in the student support arrangements. They are designed specifically to help those students whose access to, or continuance in, further or higher education might be being inhibited by financial difficulty.

In Session 1995–96 access funds resources totalling £4.3 million were made available to universities and colleges in Scotland. Individual applications for assistance are dealt with by the institutions which are best placed to judge the needs of their own students.

Access funds need to be viewed against the background of the overall level of resources made available to students through maintenance grants and loans. For students in full-time higher education, this package of support is uprated annually, and it is worth virtually the same in real terms as the grant alone in 1979–80.

Politically Restricted Posts

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many people working in Scottish local government work in politically restricted posts. [28969]

Mr. Kynoch: The information requested is not held centrally.

Read 3 Project

Mr. Galbraith: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he had made of the Read 3 project; and if he will make a statement. [29051]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The development of the Read 3 project is the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health. The Scottish Office Department of Health is not contributing to the costs of the development but is monitoring its progress. Many general practitioners in Scotland currently use a form of Read version 2, which is also being piloted for hospitals in Scotland.

Objective 5 Funding

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) if he will list the allocation of objective 5 funds made so far within Scotland under *(a)* RETEX, *(b)* PESCA, *(c)* LEADER II and *(d)* other schemes; [29242]

(2) what funds have been made available to the Hawick and Peebles travel-to-work areas to date; and what plans he has to make further allocations; [29243]

(3) what extent textile dependency in travel-to-work areas contributes to eligibility for RETEX funding; [29244]

(4) which diversification schemes in the Scottish Borders council area have received financial support from RETEX funding to date; and what additional schemes are currently under consideration. [29245]

Mr. Kynoch: The table shows the allocations of the relevant Community initiative resources to objective 5b areas in Scotland. In some cases, specific allocations are not made and in others allocations are indicative.

£ million	*UK allocation*	*Scotland allocation*	*Objective 5b allocation*
RETEX II (1994 to 1997)	26.600	[1]5.450	[1]1.388
PESCA (Non Objective 1 sub-programme 1995 to 1999)	n/a	10.106	n/a
LEADER II (Objective 5b programme 1995 to 1999)	n/a	6.906	6.906
SME (Lowlands programme 1995 to 1999)	n/a	7.071	n/a
EMPLOYMENT (1994 to 1999)	111.778	n/a	n/a
ADAPT (1995 to 1999)	226.014	n/a	n/a

[1] Denotes indicative allocation only.

Textile dependency as set out in article 6 of the Commission's guidelines as decided on 13 May 1992 (*Official Journal* number C 142, 4 June 1992), determined the eligibility for funding under RETEX.

The Borders objective 5b programme was allocated some £24 million of European funding for the period 1994 to 1999. To date £862,600 of, European regional development funding has been made available to the Hawick travel-to-work area and £367,500 has been made available to the Peebles travel-to-work area. In addition, match funding of £1,497,600 has been provided by project sponsors.

Under European Social funding, a total of £1,958,480, involving match funding of £2,393,698, has been allocated to the Borders region under objective 3 and 5b. Beneficiaries from the Hawick and Peebles travel-to-work areas have been supported.

The Scottish RETEX II working group met on 30 April and recommended for approval, subject to further information three Borders projects with combined funding of £330,000. The projects involve diversification into the developing environmental technologies. There are currently no other applications under consideration. The deadline for the next round of applications under RETEX II is 30 August 1996.

District Courts

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list for each district council in Scotland the amounts collected by the district courts in each year since 1991; and of those how much was (i) remitted to the Queen's and Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer and (ii) retained by each district council. [29660]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The information requested has been collected centrally only for the last two years. The table sets out the figures, provided by district courts, for the financial years ending 1994 and 1995 and relates to district councils before 1 April 1996. The basis on which the figures were compiled differed slightly each year and are therefore directly comparable.

Column 1 shows by local authority area the total value of revenue, including fines imposed by the court, fixed penalties, registered and fiscal fines received by the court each year. Column 2 details the value of fines passed to the Crown Office for onward transmission to the Queen's and Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer and column 3 lists the sums retained by each local authority.

Local Authority prior to 1st April 1996	*1993–94*			*1994–95*		
	Column 1 £	*Column 2* £	*Column 3* £	*Column 1* £	*Column 2* £	*Column 3* £
Aberdeen	809,072	640,072	169,000	[1]—	523,733	[1]—
Angus	227,896	181,207	46,689	257,057	217,385	39,672
Annandale and Eskdale	206,888	183,879	23,009	185,571	79,394	106,177
Argyll and Bute	131,840	52,285	79,555	33,572	5,892	26,680
Badenoch and Strathspey	103,205	97,862	5,343	75,640	64,310	11,330
Banff and Buchan	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	174,151	36,456	137,695
Bearsden and Milngavie	50,493	37,853	12,640	56,113	35,769	20,344
Berwickshire	86,045	84,044	2,001	155,000	153,000	2,000
Caithness	10,403	5,112	5,291	13,566	8,567	4,999
Clackmannan	143,749	94,223	49,526	118,439	75,613	42,826
Clydebank	48,838	30,400	18,438	43,622	36,248	7,374
Clydesdale	474,981	466,530	8,451	309,958	297,914	12,044
Cumbernauld and Kilsyth	111,101	38,363	72,738	66,268	24,401	41,867
Cunnock and Doon Valley	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	61,526	45,492	16,034

Local Authority prior to 1st April 1996	1993–94 Column 1 £	1993–94 Column 2 £	1993–94 Column 3 £	1994–95 Column 1 £	1994–95 Column 2 £	1994–95 Column 3 £
Cunninghame	189,771	117,359	72,412	228,146	149,488	78,658
Dumbarton	81,205	65,567	15,638	95,978	78,241	17,737
Dundee	619,290	427,176	192,114	584,822	386,908	197,914
Dunfermline	299,415	248,359	51,056	277,523	229,545	47,978
East Kilbride	47,803	39,991	7,812	55,729	39,518	16,211
East Lothian	162,152	130,242	31,910	200,225	173,142	27,083
Eastwood	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	114,355	93,467	20,888
Edinburgh	2,301,073	1,515,926	785,102	2,457,926	1,344,464	1,113,462
Ettrick and Lauderdale	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	160,153	139,675	20,478
Falkirk	359,302	273,744	85,525	318,744	240,712	78,032
Glasgow	2,768,604	56,589	2,712,015	2,590,957	1,795,927	795,030
Gordon	81,974	80,229	1,745	75,913	96,271	–20,358
Hamilton	332,213	278,716	53,497	201,302	197,999	3,302
Inverclyde	193,378	141,000	52,378	238,512	223,272	15,240
Inverness	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	62,640	52,669	9,971
Kilmarnock and Loudoun	155,656	144,460	11,196	125,940	111,991	13,942
Kincardine and Deeside	104,557	91,621	12,936	91,025	83,197	7,828
Kirkcaldy	239,217	182,567	56,650	253,123	210,494	42,629
Kyle and Carrick	215,932	167,894	48,038	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Lochaber	37,432	23,573	13,859	61,047	37,375	23,672
Midlothian	245,305	101,493	143,812	166,041	110,057	55,984
Monklands	115,234	103,545	11,689	112,397	100,385	2,012
Moray	222,024	176,813	45,211	225,089	168,444	56,645
Motherwell	393,984	279,238	114,746	284,953	222,139	62,814
Nairn	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	7,064	4,515	2,549
Nithsdale	131,796	97,100	34,696	202,000	151,000	51,000
North East Fife	127,916	100,626	27,290	103,467	98,543	4,924
Perth and Kinross	302,371	234,700	67,671	388,446	309,618	78,828
Renfrew	224,585	133,815	90,770	449,779	358,938	90,841
Ross and Cromarty	87,562	70,846	16,716	82,707	68,184	14,523
Roxburgh	74,341	66,997	7,344	92,957	74,905	18,052
Skye and Lochalsh	11,404	10,165	1,239	7,729	6,865	864
Stewartry	123,738	56,273	67,465	63,382	54,727	8,655
Stirling	230,972	187,349	43,623	241,716	217,450	24,266
Strathkelvin	163,962	141,022	22,940	148,000	127,000	21,000
Sutherland	5,350	4,340	1,010	12,883	7,810	5,073
Tweeddale	67,797	63,863	3,934	60,525	54,587	5,958
West Lothian	406,648	305,278	101,370	338,534	269,977	68,557
Western Isles	10,506	8,960	1,546	15,144	12,010	3,134
Wigtown	81,880	75,505	6,375	77,200	[1]—	[1]—

[1] Figures not supplied by local authority.

Ravenspark Hospital

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when Ravenspark hospital will be closed; and what improvement the Scottish Office will have in the closure process. [29008]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton *[holding answer 13 May 1996]:* Ayrshire and Arran health board's three-month public consultation exercise on the closure of Ravenspark hospital ended on 30 October 1995. I have yet to receive the board's formal proposals for the hospital.

Once I have received any closure proposals from the health board, I shall consider them carefully before making a final decision. I shall need to be convinced of real benefits for patients as a result of any proposals.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Beef Imports

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if the Government will be requiring the removal of brain, spinal cord and intestines from beef imported into the United Kingdom from other countries with BSE amongst their cattle. [24241]

Mrs. Browning: The Beef (Emergency Control) Order 1996, as amended, already prohibits the sale for human consumption of all meat derived from bovines which, at the time of slaughter, were more than 30 months old. This measure applies to all bovines slaughtered after the commencement of the order, whether in the UK or overseas, other than those slaughtered in third countries listed in the schedule to the No. 2 amendment order where the Government are satisfied we can import beef without risk. This exemption does not include any countries where there have been cases of BSE.

As regards bovines less than 30 months of age, some countries with BSE have introduced controls requiring the removal of specified bovine offals. We continue to keep the position under review.

Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will place in the Library all publications resulting from research sponsored by his

Department into the transmissibility of spongiform encephalopathies with particular reference to scrapie and BSE. [25192]

Mrs. Browning: I have placed a bibliography of research into transmissible spongiform encephalopathies—TSEs— detailing much of the published work carried out by the three main research centres in the United Kingdom which receive Government funding, in the Library.

Arrangement for publications on Government-funded TSE research by other institutions are dealt with by the author. Details of these publications are not held centrally.

Mr. Alan W. Williams: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what checks are made on *(a)* animal feed factories, *(b)* farms, *(c)* marts, *(d)* abattoirs, *(e)* meat wholesalers and *(f)* the rendering industry to prevent further production fo contaminated animal feed and to prevent BSE-contaminated material entering the food chain. [28539]

Mrs. Browning: The Specified Bovine Material (No. 2) Order 1996 lays down the requirements for the handling of specified bovine material—SBM—as defined in the order. It is the responsibility fo slaughterhouse operators and fresh meat wholesalers to comply in full with the controls on SBM. These are vital controls and full compliance is expected and will be enforced. Enforcement responsibilities in such premises lie with the Meat Hygiene Service—MHS. The MHS has enforced, and continues to enforce, the SBM controls rigorously and has reminded all staff at licensed premises of the importance of ensuring 100 per cent. compliance.

Random sampling in mills producing animal feed commenced on 5 February. Up to 9 May, 1,210 samples had been taken at 574 visits. Eight of the samples, all taken prior to 29 March, were positive for mammalian protein and have been investigated. Mills identified as high risk for whatever reason are receiving weekly sampling visits. Farms that have had a case of BSE and where on-farm mixes appear to have been fed are also being visited, and samples are being taken if it is thought necessary. Mills that are mixing medication into feed are required to be licensed by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain—RPSGB. Category A mills are mainly large compounders and are permitted to mix less than 2kg of medication per tonne of finished feed. Category B mills are mainly on-farm mixers, but some compounders, who are permitted to mix medication only at inclusion rates of more than 2kg per tonne. If medication is not mixed, millers/mixers are not required to be registered. Most of these unregistered premises, but not all, are on-farm mixers. All category A mills will be visited during the coming month and a questionnaire is being sent to all category B mills to determine whether the premises need to be visited for sampling purposes.

Any animals taken to market which are suspected of being affected by BSE must be reported to the Ministry. Animals confirmed by the Ministry's veterinary officer as being affected by BSE are destroyed and their carcases sent for disposal by incineration. All animals going for slaughter are subject to an ante mortem inspection at the slaughterhouse. Animals identified at the slaughterhouse as being BSE suspects are reported to the Ministry. The Ministry's veterinary officer visits the premises and, if the diagnosis is confirmed, arranges for the animal to be destroyed and disposed of.

Checks on rendering plants are currently made by weekly unannounced visits by the state veterinary service. These ensure that rendering plants handle only the categories of material which they are approved for and, where appropriate, that SBM and non-SBM material is kept separate by use of dedicated processing facilities. Records of amounts of material being handled are also checked.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the projected total cost of all proposed and current support measures introduced to deal with BSE for the years *(a)* 1995, *(b)* 1996, *(c)* 1997 and *(d)* 1998. [29621]

Mrs. Browning: The total estimated cost of measures in the UK taken in response to the BSE situation is £1.01 billion in 1996–97, £0.74 billion in 1997–98 and £0.68 billion in 1998–99.

Cattle Slaughter (Compensation)

Miss Emma Nicholson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what considerations underlay the payment of compensation under the over 30–month cattle disposal scheme at different prices through abattoirs and livestock markets. [28697]

Mr. Baldry: The scheme is essentially a live weight scheme and the level of compensation payable is based on live weight. In providing for the delivery of stock direct to abattoirs where facilities for weighing live are not common, we were constrained by the conclusions of the Agriculture Council of 1 to 3 April which implied that 1 ecu live weight was equivalent to 2 ecu dead weight. Throughout our discussions of this scheme in the beef management committee, some member states have insisted that EU funding should apply only to cull cows. It was not, therefore, possible to seek to negotiate a range of coefficients which reflect the different killing out percentages likely to be seen in practice.

Beef Industry (Consultants' Report)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many management consultancies were approached recently with a view to preparing a report on the UK beef industry. [28715]

Mrs. Browning: Coopers and Lybrand was the only organisation to be approached recently with a view to the preparation of a report on the UK slaughtering and cutting plant sectors.

Mr. Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the cost of the Coopers and Lybrand report on the UK beef industry; who was responsible for commissioning it; and for what reasons. [28846]

Mrs. Browning: The total cost of commissioning the recent Coopers and Lybrand report of 10 April on the UK slaughtering and cutting plant sectors is approximately £203,000 excluding VAT. In accordance with the requirements of Government accounting, the non-competitively tendered contract was let with the

agreement of the departmental accounting officer. The reasons for the contract were to obtain urgent analysis, advice and recommendations on:

(a) whether there was a blockage of meat in abattoirs and cutting plants due to the recent and present crisis in the beef industry;

(b) whether any such blockage was undermining the financial viability of enterprises that would otherwise be financially secure; and

(c) to make observations on the possible justification for exceptional Government help for those affected, and whether there was some simple mechanism that could be employed to give effect to any such aid.

Dry-stone Walling

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many metres of dry-stone walling were *(a)* built, *(b)* maintained and *(c)* destroyed in each of the last three years in the United Kingdom. [29149]

Mr. Boswell: We estimate that, in financial years 1993–94, 1994–95 and 1995–96 around 1,355km, 1,020km and 620km[1] respectively of stone walls were built or renovated with grant aid under the farm and conservation grant scheme of environmentally sensitive area schemes. Information on stone walls destroyed is not held.

[1]England, Wales and Northern Ireland only. Figures for Scotland not yet available.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many skilled dry-stone wallers there are in the United Kingdom. [29147]

Mr. Boswell: I regret that the information is not available within MAFF.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many dry-stone wallers were trained to a recognised standard in each of the last three years. [29148]

Mr. Boswell: I regret that the information is not available within MAFF.

Beef Ban

Mr. Simpson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list those non-EU countries which currently ban British beef, indicating in each case the date the ban became effective. [28976]

Mrs. Browning: Commission decision 96/239/EC of 27 March 1996 provided that the UK shall not export from its territory meat and meat products obtained from bovine animals slaughtered in the UK. The list of third countries therefore shows those countries with a ban on imports of British beef on the day before the introduction of the Commission decision. The month and year when the ban was introduced are shown where available.

Importing country	*Date of ban*
Algeria	June 1990
Argentina	August 1991
Bahrain	—
Bulgaria	September 1994
Canada	July 1990
China	October 1990
Iran	June 1990
Iraq	October 1994
Jamaica	September 1991
Japan	July 1990
Jordan	September 1990
Kazakhstan (CIS)	August 1993
Libya	November 1990
Lithuania	April 1995
Malaysia	—
Philippines	October 1994
Russian Federation	September 1993
Saudi Arabia	September 1990
Switzerland	June 1990
Syria	August 1990
Taiwan	February 1990
United Arab Emirates	August 1990
United States of America	—
Uzbekistan	—

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the countries which have banned the import of British beef since 1987. [29036]

Mrs. Browning: Commission decision 96/239/EC of 27 March provided that the UK shall not export from its territory meat and meat products obtained from bovine animals slaughtered in the UK. The information below sets out the position on the day before the Commission decision was introduced, identifying separately those countries which, during the period from 1987, have introduced and/or maintained a ban, and those which had introduced, but subsequently lifted, such a ban.

Countries which have maintained a ban:

Algeria
Argentina
Canada
China
Bahrain
Bulgaria
Iran
Iraq
Jamaica
Japan
Jordan
Kazakhstan (CIS)
Libya
Lithuania
Malaysia
Philippines
Russian Federation
Saudi Arabia
Switzerland
Syria
Taiwan
United Arab Emirates
United States of America
Uzbekistan

Countries which have introduced, but subsequently lifted, a ban:

Chile

Cyprus

Egypt

Kuwait

Lebanon

State of Sarawak (Malaysia)

Mauritius

Morocco

Oman

Poland

Trinidad and Tobago

Tunisia

Turkey

Qatar

Veterinary Medicines Directorate

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what performance targets he has set for the Veterinary Medicines Directorate for 1996–97; and if he will make a statement. [30111]

Mr. Douglas Hogg: The chief executive of the Veterinary Medicines Directorate—VMD—has submitted his proposals to me and I have agreed that the VMD should be set the following performance targets for 1996–97:

- to achieve full cost recovery for its three remain business activities of licensing and surveillance, policy work and residue monitoring;
- to determine 80 per cent. of new marketing authorisations within 120 clock days; 95 per cent. within 200 clock days;
- to achieve a 3 per cent. efficiency gain;
- to comply with the budgetary controls resulting from the public expenditure survey—PES—and the supply estimates; and
- to determine 90 per cent. of all renewals and variations outstanding on 1 April 1996 by 31 December 1996, and to introduce new internal targets for processing renewals and variations from 1 October 1996.

These are challenging targets which will continue to build on the improvements already made in efficiency and quality of service provided by the directorate since its establishment as a next steps agency, and for which I commend the chief executive and his staff. In addition, I have agreed the VMD's corporate plan for 1996–97 to 1998–99, and copies are being placed in the Library of the House and the Public Information Office.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 17 May 1996

ENVIRONMENT

Small Cetaceans (North Sea)

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what assessment he has made of the population status of small cetaceans in the North sea; and what measures she has taken since the implementation of The Hague memorandum of understanding on small cetaceans to ensure habitat protection in the North sea. [29884]

Mr. Clappison: During 1994 the UK participated in an international project that aimed to record the abundance and distribution of small cetaceans throughout the North sea and adjacent waters. The project, which was co-ordinated by the sea mammal research unit in Cambridge, also received financial and logistical support from the European Commission, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden. A copy of the project report can be obtained from my Department.

After The Hague memorandum of understanding, the United Kingdom signed and became a party to the agreement on the conservation of small cetaceans of the Baltic and North seas.

Enterprise Zones

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment if he will list the location of each enterprise zone and the date each was established since the introduction of such zones. [29906]

Sir Paul Beresford: The tables list the location and date of each enterprise zone established in the United Kingdom since they were first introduced in 1980. Each zone is designated for a period of 10 years, and zones that are still extant are indicated by an asterisk. The names of zones are given where they exist.

Location	*Date*
England	
Corby	22 June 1981
Dudley (No. 1)	10 July 1981
Wakefield: Langthwaite grange	31 July 1981
Salford/Trafford	12 August 1981
Speke (Liverpool)	25 August 1981
Tyneside	25 August 1981
Hartlepool	23 October 1981
Isle of Dogs (London Docklands)	26 April 1982
Wellingborough	26 July 1983
Rotherham	16 August 1983
Scunthorpe: Normanby ridge	23 September 1983
Queensway	
Wakefield: Dale lane and Kinsley	23 September 1983
Workington (Nos. 1 to 6)	4 October 1983
North-west Kent (Nos. 1 to 5)	31 October 1983
Middlesbrough	8 November 1983
North-east Lancashire (Nos. 1 to 7)	7 December 1983
Telford (Nos. 1 to 5)	13 January 1984
Glanford (Humberside)	13 April 1984
Dudley: Round Oak	3 October 1984
North-west Kent (No. 6 and 7):	
No. 6 and 7 Chaltam Maritime*	10 October 1986
Sunderland:	
No. 1 Hylton Riverside/Southwick*	27 April 1990
No. 2 Castletown*	
No. 3 Doxford park*	
East Midlands (Nos. 1 to 7):	
Nos. 1, 2 and 3 Holmewood*	3 November 1995
No. 4 Manton Wood, Worksop*	16 November 1995
No. 5 and 6 Crown farm, Mansfield*	22 September 1995
No. 7 Sherwood business park*	21 November 1995
Dearne Valley (Nos. 1 to 6):	
No. 1 Manvers east, Rotherham*	3 November 1995
No. 2 Highgate businesspark, Barnsley*	
No. 3 Goldthorpe industrial estate, Barnsley*	
No. 4 Denaby lane industrial estate, Doncaster*	
No. 5 Cortonwood park, Rotherham*	
No. 6 Wombwell bypass, Barnsley*	
East Durham (Nos. 1 to 6):	
No. 1 Bracken hill*	29 November 1995
No. Peterlee north-west industrial estate*	
No. 3 Peterlee south-west industrial estate*	
No. 4 Seaham grange*	
No. 5 Fox Cover*	
No. 6 Dawdon*	
Tyne Riverside:	
No. 1*	19 February 1996
Nos. 2 to 11 (proposed)	Mid 1996
Northern Ireland	
Belfast	21 October 1981
Londonderry:	
Springtown	13 September 1983
Campsie	
Scotland	
Clydeband	
No. 1	3 August 1981
No. 2	18 August 1981
Invergordon	7 October 1983
Alness	
Tayside Dundee (Nos. 1 to 6)	9 January 1984
Tayside Arbroath	
Inverclyde (Nos. 1 to 11):	
Nos. 1 to 4 Port Glasgow*	3 March 1989
Nos. 5 to 10 Greenock*	
No. 11 west of Gourock*	
Lanarkshire*	1 February 1993
Wales	
Swansea (No. 1)	11 June 1981
Delyn	21 July 1983
Milford Haven:	
North shore (Nos. 1 to 7)	24 April 1984
South shore (Nos. 1 to 6)	
Swansea (No. 2)	6 March 1985

NORTHERN IRELAND

Council of Europe Meetings

Mr. Terry Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many meetings of, or organised by,

the Council of Europe since January 1995 have been attended by Ministers or officials of his Department; and if he will make a statement. [29363]

Sir John Wheeler: None. The UK permanent representative to the Council of Europe consults this Department and the Northern Ireland Departments on all issues of particular importance to Northern Ireland.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Council of Europe Meetings

Mr. Terry Davis: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many meetings of, or organised by, the Council of Europe since January 1995 have been attended by Ministers or officials of his Department; and if he will make a statement. [29361]

Mr. Jonathan Evans: During the period in question, the Lord Chancellor addressed a meeting of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg and spoke during the visit of the standing committee of the Parliamentary Assembly to London. Departmental officials attended one conference, one seminar, one colloquy, and nine meetings of committees of experts, including working groups of those committees.

HEALTH

Midwives

Mrs. Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to encourage midwives to stay in the profession and to encourage non-practising midwives to return to work. [28261]

Mr. Horam: A higher proportion of the total stock of nursing and midwifery staff are working, and using their professional skill for the benefit of patients, than ever before. Local employers are responsible for developing and implementing effective human resource strategies further to improve recruitment and retention.

Nursing Shortages

Mr. Milburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 30 April, *Official Report*, column *505*, in which *(a)* areas and *(b)* specialties there are nursing shortages. [29466]

Mr. Horam: The national pay review body has considered all the evidence and concluded that there is no widespread shortage of nursing staff.

Mental Health

Mr. Milburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients with learning disabilities have been detained under the mental health legislation. [29405]

Mr. Bowis: In 1992–93, the latest year for which information is available, there were 252 formal admissions of patients detained under the Mental Health Act 1983 and classified as mentally impaired or severely mentally impaired.

Clinical Negligence Claims

Mr. Milburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what has been the cost of clinical negligence claims in each region in each year since 1991–92. [29399]

Mr. Horam: I refer the hon. Member to the reply that my hon. Friend the Minister for Health gave him on 6 March 1995, *Official Report*, columns *40–42*. As was made clear at the time, the figures for the earlier years were based on information that was not comprehensive and, in particular, did not include data from national health service trusts. The table shows the regional breakdowns based on latest estimates for 1993–4 and 1994–95 and provisional figures for 1995–96, consistent with the national estimates for those years.

Costs to the NHS of clinical negligence settlements by region

Region	*1993–94 £ million (estimated)*	*1994–95 £ million (estimated)*	*1995–96 £ million (provisional)*
Northern and Yorkshire	15.2	25.0	16.3
Trent	7.1	11.7	15.1
Anglia and Oxford	10.6	18.2	14.8
North Thames	21.4	30.4	37.2
South Thames	30.6	26.9	18.6
South and West	8.0	19.2	16.4
West Midlands	8.4	6.1	6.4
North West	16.6	22.5	24.3
Total	117.9	160.0	149.1

Ethnic Health Research

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to take forward the national ethnic health research and development programme. [29527]

Mr. Malone: The Department attaches great importance to ensuring that the health needs of ethnic minority populations are recognised and met. Since 1989, it has allocated £0.5 million each year to fund a range of development projects aimed at improving access to health services. A directory listing the initiatives has just been published, and copies will be placed in the Library.

In addition, the Department's research programme currently funds a number of projects, to a combined value of £3.5 million, which have an ethnic dimension.

Within the national health service executive, the west midlands regional office leads on research and development in this area. It has commissioned projects to a value of £300,000.

General Practitioners

Mr. David Nicholson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the measures he has taken to reduce the administrative burdens affecting general practitioners. [29644]

Mr. Malone: Good progress is being made to implement the report of the efficiency scrutiny into bureaucracy in general practice, "Patients not Paper". As a result, the number of forms completed by general practitioners and practice staff will be reduced by around 17 million a year when new procedures are introduced from 1 July 1996.

Health Visitors

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy to require that the organisational structure of national health service trusts includes qualified health visitors and community nurses at management levels. [29551]

Mr. Horam: Decisions concerning staffing, including the employment of health visitors and community nurses at management level, are the responsibility of local managers, who are in the best position to consider the amount and type of work to be done in the light of the services they have contracted to provide.

Council of Europe Meetings

Mr. Terry Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many meetings of, or organised by, the Council of Europe since January 1995 have been attended by Ministers or officials of his Department; and if he will make a statement. [29352]

Mr. Malone: Since January 1995, 23 programmed meetings of the Council of Europe have been attended by Department of Health officials; none has been attended by Department of Health Ministers.

Read Codes System

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 10 May, *Official Report*, column *285*, what estimate he has made of the approximate average number of hours spent by the clinicians on participation in the Read codes development exercise. [29960]

Mr. Horam: There is no information available centrally on which to base such an estimate.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Council of Europe Meetings

Mr. Terry Davis: To ask the Attorney-General how many meetings of, or organised by, the Council of Europe since January 1995 have been attended by Ministers or officials of the Law Officers Department; and if he will make a statement. [29360]

The Attorney-General: An official from the Crown Prosecution Service attended two such meetings, and an official from the Serious Fraud Office attended one meeting.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Low Newton Remand Centre

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many prisoners by gender *(a)* sentenced and *(b)* on remand have requested vegan food and toiletries while detained at Her Majesty's remand centre, Low Newton (i) during 1995 and (ii) 1996 to date; [29340]

(2) what representations his Department has received regarding the non-availability of *(a)* sanitary products, *(b)* vegan foods and *(c)* toiletries for vegans at Her Majesty's remand centre, Low Newton in the last year; and if he will make a statement. [29339]

Miss Widdecombe: Responsibility for these matters has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Butler to Mr. Bill Etherington, dated 17 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Questions about representations on the non-availability of internal sanitary products, vegan foods and toiletries for vegans at Low Newton remand centre; and the number of times prisoners have requested vegan foods and toiletries at the centre during 1995 and 1996.

In the last year, letters were received from the Wear Valley Women's Aid Organisation and from the Vegan Society about provision for two sentenced female vegan prisoners. A number of letters were also received from the families and friends of the two women and these were replied to by the prison.

I am not aware of these items being requested by other prisoners during 1995 and 1996 to date.

Overseas Residents (General Elections)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many overseas residents were registered to vote at general elections in the United Kingdom on 31 December 1995. [29721]

Mr. Sackville: The number is 17,934.

Prisoners (Fine Defaults)

Mr. Alex Carlile: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many and what percentage of the prison population have been imprisoned for crimes of fine default; what is the average time spent in prison for people convicted of defaulting on fines of *(a)* £1–£49, *(b)* £50–99, *(c)* £100—£199, *(d)* £200–£299 and *(e)* £300–£400; what is the average cost of imprisoning (i) male and (ii) female prisoners for a week; and if he will make a statement. [29393]

Miss Widdecombe *[holding answer 16 May 1996]:* Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Director General of the Prison Service, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from A. J. Butler to Mr. Alex Carlile, dated 17 May 1996:

The Home Secretary has asked me, in the absence of the Director General from the office, to reply to your recent Question asking how many and what percentage of the prison population have been imprisoned for crimes of fine defaulters; what is the average time spent in prison for people convicted of defaulting on fines of (a) £1–£49, (b) £50–£99, (c) £100–£199, (d) £200–£299 and (e) £300–£400; and what is the average cost of imprisoning (i) male and (ii) female prisoners for one week.

Figures for the population of fine defaulters are available for the last day of each month. For January to March, the average population was 266 in Prison Service establishments in England and Wales. This is 0.5 per cent of the total prison population. The average time served by all fine defaulters is about one week. Information is not available centrally on the amount of unpaid fines. The net operating cost per prisoner per week was £512 for female prisoners and £421 for all other prisons in 1994–95.

Sentencing Statistics

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list for each of the last 10 available years *(a)* for each of the former police authorities in Wales, *(b)* for Wales, *(c)* for England and *(d)* for England and Wales, the number of people (i) sentenced to terms in prison, (ii) on remand and (iii) the total of (i) and (ii) indicating the percentage change over the period as a whole in each case. [28656]

Mr. Maclean *[holding answer 10 May 1996]:* Information, based on statistics on court proceedings, is given in the table.

Number and percentage change of persons sentenced to immediate custody and remanded[1] in custody by area for all offences 1984 to 1994

Area/Disposal Police force area	*1984*	*1985*	*1986*	*1987*	*1988*	*1089*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*Percentage change 1984 to 1994*
Dyfed Powys												
Immediate custody	354	372	248	294	267	266	289	369	314	420	412	+16
Gwent												
Immediate custody	537	667	549	554	577	564	495	535	568	543	642	+20
North Wales												
Immediate custody	829	815	736	789	837	805	670	766	596	700	742	−10
South Wales												
Immediate custody	2,031	2,139	1,852	1,763	1,772	1,609	1,598	1,943	1,778	1,900	2,145	+6
Wales												
Immediate custody	3,751	3,993	3,385	3,400	3,453	3,244	3,052	3,613	3,256	3,563	3,941	+5
England												
Immediate custody	75,011	79,325	69,497	70,963	68,612	60,881	54,561	57,636	54,732	54,836	65,244	−13
England and Wales[2]												
Immediate custody	78,762	83,318	72,882	74,363	72,065	64,125	57,613	61,249	57,988	58,399	69,185	−12
Remanded in custody	45,400	48,100	38,500	42,900	46,800	49,600	48,500	50,800	49,300	48,300	55,900	+23

[1] Remand figures are available for England and Wales only, although figures quoted in this table should be taken as broad estimates only, due to data quality problems.
[2] Total figures cannot be calculated because there is double counting.

TRANSPORT

Crash Barriers

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many miles of *(a)* dual carriageway and *(b)* motorway in the United Kingdom are without crash barriers, and if he will make a statement. [28644]

Mr. Watts: Information on non-trunk dual carriageways and motorways is not held centrally.

The relevant figures for trunk roads are as follows:

(a) all-purpose dual carriageway trunk roads

England: under 31 miles of the programme for installing central reservation safety fencing remains to be carried out

Wales: 15 miles has no safety fencing

Scotland: 43 miles has no safety fencing

Northern Ireland: 74 miles has no safety fencing

(b) trunk motorways

All trunk motorways have central reserve safety fencing apart from about a mile in Scotland

Foreign-registered Aircraft

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what proposals he has to ensure that foreign-registered aircraft based in the United Kingdom and performing passenger charter services for tour operators between states other than the state of registry comply with International Civil Aviation Organisation standards throughout the time they are based in the United Kingdom. [29558]

Mr. Norris: Few foreign airlines base aircraft in the United Kingdom for a significant period in order to carry out fifth freedom passenger charter flights. The Department of Transport checks the airworthiness certificates of all foreign-registered aircraft operating charter flights to or from the United Kingdom as well as the airline's certificate of competency. The procedure followed by the Department is set out in my reply to the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich on 7 March 1996, *Official Report*, column *309*. We are considering, as part of our review of fifth freedom policy, whether stricter controls could be applied.

Second Severn Crossing

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what work has been carried out on the second Severn crossing in the past three weeks; and what work remains to be done in each of the next three weeks. [29765]

Mr. Watts: I have asked the chief executive of the Highways Agency to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Lawrie Haynes to Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody, dated 17 May 1996:

As you know, John Watts has asked me to reply to your Parliamentary Question asking the Secretary of State, what work has been carried out on the Second Severn Crossing in the past three weeks; and what work remains to be done in each of the next three weeks.

You are aware that the Second Severn Crossing is a privately financed project under the Concession Agreement between Severn River Crossing and the Department of Transport.

The certificate of substantial completion was issued on 26 April; final inspection and finishing works are under way and will be completed to enable opening to traffic on 5 June.

Road Maintenance

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will publish a breakdown of capital and current maintenance of local highways for each of the last 10 years. [29556]

Mr. Norris: The definitions of capital and current maintenance expenditure by local highway authorities have changed during the 10-year period. The figures in the table are for outturn expenditure of English local highway authorities divided between capital and current as defined now. They exclude expenditure on professional and technical services.

£ million

Year	*Capital*	*Current*	*Total*
1985–86	400	557	957
1986–87	410	609	1,019
1987–88	438	629	1,068
1988–89	446	666	1,112
1989–90	487	720	1,206
1990–91	500	834	1,334
1991–92	525	816	1,341
1992–93	561	851	1,411
1993–94	610	846	1,456
1994–95	639	833	1,472

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will list for each transport administrative region, the detailed expenditure on the capital and current maintenance of motorways and trunk roads for each of the last 10 years. [29555]

Mr. Watts: I have asked the chief executive of the Highways Agency to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Lawrie Haynes to Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody, dated 17 May 1996:

The Secretary of State for Transport has asked me to reply to your recent question about the expenditure on the capital and current maintenance of motorways and trunk roads for each of the last 10 years.

Details of motorway and trunk road maintenance expenditure during the period 1992/93 to 1994/95 are available by transport administrative region, as follows:

£ million

	Capital roads maintenance			*Capital bridge maintenance*			*Current maintenance*		
	1992–93	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*
London	19	37	45	34	18	16	27	29	25
Northern	16	16	20	9	9	5	10	9	11
Yorkshire and Humberside	62	56	57	18	10	13	17	15	15
North West	41	38	37	17	14	10	19	21	20
West Midland	29	35	28	19	28	34	18	19	20
East Midland	27	25	25	7	5	8	11	12	13
Eastern	52	61	48	10	10	10	25	25	26
South East	84	104	113	10	26	26	24	24	25
South West	26	32	29	6	10	24	13	12	14
Total	356	404	402	130	130	146	164	166	169

For years prior to 1992–93, no regional breakdown is readily available. However, total annual maintenance expenditure figures are as follows:

£ million

Year	*Capital roads maintenance*	*Capital bridge maintenance*	*Current maintenance*
1985–86	159	7	77
1986–87	181	37	93
1987–88	213	51	84
1988–89	130	60	102
1989–90	244	87	104
1990–91	299	113	121
1991–92	306	129	145

Figures for 1995–96 cannot be confirmed until September this year.

Driving Instructors

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) how many checks have been undertaken by the Vehicle Inspectorate on driving instructors to ensure compliance with regulations in each of the last five years; [29544]

(2) if he will list for each contractor which supplies legal advice to the Vehicle Inspectorate *(a)* the total value of the contracts awarded for each of the last 12 months, *(b)* the number of cases undertaken over the last 12 months and *(c)* the number of convictions over the last 12 months. [29531]

Mr. Norris: I have asked the chief executive of the Vehicle Inspectorate to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Ron Oliver to Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody, dated 17 May 1996:

The Secretary of State for Transport has asked me to reply to your questions concerning

a) the number of checks undertaken by the Vehicle Inspectorate on driving instructors to ensure compliance with regulations for each of the last 5 years; and

b) the value of contracts awarded to contractors supplying legal advice to the Vehicle Inspectorate during the last 12 months and the number of cases undertaken, as well as the number of convictions over the last 12 months.

The Driving Standards Agency requests the Vehicle Inspectorate to conduct investigations into alleged illegal instructions by driving instructors. They also request blitz checks with identify those giving illegal instruction. Data is only available for the last 3 years.

	1993–94	*1994–95*	*1995–96*
Investigations into Alleged Illegal Instruction	147	141	137
Blitz Checks	9	8	14

The information regarding contractors supplying legal advice is not available in the form requested.

Council of Europe Meetings

Mr. Terry Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many meetings of, or organised by, the Council of Europe since January 1995 have been attended by Ministers or officials of his Department; and if he will make a statement. [29370]

Mr. Norris: None.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

British Energy

Mrs. Beckett: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if he will place in the Library the independent actuarial advice upon which his decision to set the level of British Energy's contributions to a segregated fund was based. [29475]

Mr. Lang: The independent actuarial advice was provided over a period of several months. Compilation of that advice is being completed by the Government's actuaries and will be placed in the Library of the House when available.

Research Councils

Mr. Ingram: To ask the President of the Board of Trade, pursuant to his answer of 29 April, *Official Report*, column *362*, if he will give a breakdown of the allocation by project of the sums given to each research council for expenditure in Scotland. [29488]

Mr. Lang *[holding answer 15 May 1996]:* The information requested could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Disabled People

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the changes that have been made to social security benefits for people with disabilities since 1986; and what estimates he has made of *(a)* the number of people whose income has (i) increased and (ii) decreased by each of these changes and *(b)* the amounts of money involved in each change. [25906]

Mr. Burt *[holding answer 30 April 1996]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea (Sir N. Scott) to the hon. Member for Bristol, East (Ms Corston) on 26 July 1993, *Official Report*, columns *715–16*. Information is in the table on changes that have occurred to benefits for long-term sick and disabled people since July 1993.

Estimates of the number of people whose income has increased or decreased are not available, and it is not possible to estimate the cumulative financial effects of each change. However, expenditure overall on benefits for long-term sick and disabled people has quadrupled in real terms since 1979 and more than doubled in real terms since 1986.

Start date	*Benefit*	*Change*
October 1993	Disability Working allowance	Allowed for the introduction into DWA and family credit of payment of benefit in a single lump sum payment.
May 1994	Invalidity Benefit and Severe Disablement Allowance	Claimants accepted as being incapable of work allowed to do unpaid voluntary work of less than 16 hours a week.
October 1994	Severe Disablement Allowance	The upper age limit for claiming SDA and the requirement to continue to satisfy entitlement conditions, equalised at 65 for both men and women.
October 1994	Disability Working Allowance	Introduction of child care allowance
April 1995	Income Support: Disability Premium and Higher Pensioner Premium	Long-term incapacity benefit replaces invalidity benefit as an entry to disability premium and higher pensioner premiums
April 1995	Severe Disablement Allowance	All new claims to SDA subject to the new incapacity for work test.
April 1995	Severe Disablement Allowance	Rules amended which link periods of entitlement.
April 1995	Incapacity Benefit	Sickness benefit and invalidity benefit replaced by incapacity benefit.
April 1995	Disability Working Allowance	Introduction of disabled child's allowance, and access to DWA after period of training.
July 1995	Disability Working Allowance	New 30-hours rule in DWA and family credit.

Start date	Benefit	Change
March 1996	Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit	Clarification of entitlement to reduced earnings allowance and retirement allowance
April 1996	Disability Working Allowance	Child care disregard raised

Council of Europe Meetings

Mr. Terry Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many meetings of, or organised by, the Council of Europe since January 1995 have been attended by Ministers or officials of his Department; and if he will make a statement. [29368]

Mr. Burt: My hon. and noble Friend the Minister of State—Lord Mackay of Ardbreknish—represented the United Kingdom at the Council of Europe's sixth conference of European Ministers of Social Security in May 1995, supported by Departmental officials. Since January 1995, officials have represented UK interests at five committee meetings, and a Benefits Agency medical adviser attended on three further occasions to serve on various expert groups.

State Earnings-related Pension Scheme

Mr. Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what has been the administrative cost each year of running SERPS. [29889]

Mr. Heald: The administrative cost of SERPS for each year is included in the estimated total cost of administering retirement pensions and is not identified separately. The figure for 1994–95, the latest year available, is £309 million. This includes the cost of order book encashments at post offices.

Source:
Social Security departmental report CM3213 March 1996.

PRIME MINISTER

Lockerbie

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will discuss with Chancellor Kohl the letter to Mr. Mosey sent by Dr. Mossle on behalf of the Federated Ministry on 6 March about the place of loading of the explosives which caused the loss of Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie, a copy of which has been sent to him, and the related statement by the Frankfurt public prosecutor's office. [29825]

The Prime Minister: I have no plans to do so. The Frankfurt public prosecutor has indicated that he, rather than the German Government, has offered "no recognition" that the bomb was put on Pan Am 103 at Frankfurt.

We believe that this statement was based on the Frankfurt prosecutor's assessment of evidence available to him.

The Scottish petition warrants were based on the entirety of the evidence available to the investigating and prosecuting authorities.

TREASURY

Male Unemployment

Mr. Spellar: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what are the latest figures for male unemployment (i) in the United Kingdom and (ii) in other member states. [29226]

Mrs. Angela Knight: The statistical office of the European Community—SOEC—publishes comparable unemployment figures based on the internationally standard definition of unemployment recommended by International Labour Organisation. Information on rates of ILO unemployment in the European Union can be found in the SOEC's monthly unemployment bulletin, which is available in the House of Commons Library.

Tax Evasion

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many full-time staff were employed by the Inland Revenue on tax evasion investigations, and at what cost, in each of the last five years. [29594]

Mr. Jack: I refer to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn) on 3 November 1995, *Official Report*, column *503*. No later figures are available at this stage.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many cases of evasion of payments of *(a)* income tax and *(b)* other tax have been discovered in each of the last five years; and what has been the value of the revenue recovered in both categories. [29592]

Mr. Jack: I refer to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn) on 26 October 1995, *official Report*, columns *727–28*. No later figures are available at this stage.

Inland Revenue Staff (Wales)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time staff have been employed by the Inland Revenue in Wales in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [29598]

Mr. Jack: The number of staff employed by the Inland Revenue in Wales in each of the last five years was as follows:

Position at	Full time	Part time
1 April 1992	4,434	652
1 April 1993	4,244	660
1 April 1994	4,056	682
1 April 1995	3,847	668
1 April 1996	3,640	668

VAT (Tourism Services)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received over the last six months on the level of value added tax currently imposed by Her Majesty's Government on tourism services; and if he will make a statement. [29607]

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: There have been a number of representations during the past six months to me and to my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor in

support of a reduced rate of VAT for tourism services. There is, however, no compelling evidence that the level of VAT in the UK places tourism at a disadvantage.

Tax Complaints

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the compensation awarded by the revenue adjudicator in each year since 1993 following complaints; and if he will make a statement. [29599]

Mr. Jack: The table gives details of the number of cases in the three years to 31 March 1996 in which the adjudicator has recommended that the Inland Revenue pays compensation.

Year	*Number of cases*	*Compensation* £	*Greatest amount* £
1993–94	29	24,379	10,397
1994–95	80	36,000	7,016
1995–96	85	89,098	22,429

The 85 cases in 1995–96 include those where the adjudicator made a recommendation in principle that compensation should be paid, but where the actual costs to be compensated have not yet been fully quantified. As a result, the figure for the total amount of compensation for that year will increase when the cases are finally settled.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how often the revenue adjudicator meets senior Inland Revenue managers to discuss performance and recommendations; and if he will make a statement. [29593]

Mr. Jack: The adjudicator has formal meetings with senior Inland Revenue managers monthly to discuss her work and issues arising from it. She and her staff have also spoken at many Inland Revenue seminars and conferences over the past three years. She sends senior Inland Revenue managers detailed quarterly reports and monthly statistical reports about her findings, and she publishes an annual report.

VAT

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the statutory authority for the imposition of value added tax on advance payments for *(a)* services and *(b)* goods; and if he will make a statement. [29642]

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Section 6 of the Value Added Tax Act 1994 provides that tax is due when a VAT invoice is issued, or when any payment is received in respect of a taxable supply made by a VAT registered trader if this happens in advance of performance of the service or delivery of the goods concerned.

Education Trusts

Mr. Byers: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many education trusts have been established by parents. [28927]

Mr. Jack *[holding answer 14 May 1996]:* I assume the hon. Member has in mind the educational trusts whose charitable status has recently been under review. There are six such trusts, which operate school fee plans for parents and other investors.

Savings Income

Mr. Harry Greenway: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his policy for taxation of income from savings; and if he will make a statement. [28545]

Mr. Jack *[holding answer 16 May 1996]:* The Govnerment have introduced a number of measures to encourage and reward savers. In his last Budget, my right hon. and learned Friend the Chancellor reduced the tax charge on savings income for basic rate taxpayers to 20 per cent. We have also built on the success of targeted savings incentives such as PEPs and TESSAs. Latest figures show that, by March 1995, nearly 6.5 million PEP subscriptions—general and single company PEPs—had been made, totalling over £22 billion. By September 1995, there were nearly 4.5 million TESSAs in existence, representing over £27 billion of savings. Last year, we extended the PEP scheme to allow a wider range of investments, such as corporate bonds, and savers whose TESSAs have matured can now re-invest the whole capital from their first account in a follow-up TESSA for a further five years. Further generous tax reliefs continue to be available to people who save for their retirement by joining tax-approved occupational or personal pension schemes. This year's Finance Act includes a number of improvements to the tax-relieved employee share schemes that are designed to encourage more employees to participate in the success of the companies for which they work.

Income Tax Reductions

Mr. Harry Greenway: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the average amount of recent tax reductions to the individual taxpayer *(a)* for the month of April and *(b)* for the coming financial year; and if he will make a statement. [28649]

Mr. Jack *[holding answer 16 May 1996]:* On average, taxpayers will pay more than £13 less income tax in April[1] and £190 less income tax in 1996–97.

[1] The figure for April is less than one twelfth of the annual figure because tax cuts come into effect only on 5 April 1996.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Permanent Secretary (Applications)

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster how many applications for the post of permanent secretary to the Welsh Office have been received; how many people other than those applying have been approached by the executive selection agency; and when he expects to make the announcement of the appointment. [29939]

Mr. Freeman: It is not the practice of the civil service commissioners to give details of a competition while it is in progress. Relevant information is published in their annual report. It is hoped that an announcement will be made about the appointment towards the end of June.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Careers Service

Mr. Eastham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what change has taken place in the definition of the key client group of the careers service since its contracting out. [29708]

Mr. Paice: There has been no change.

Mr. Eastham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what measures she will take to protect the interests of local education authorities following the contracting out of the careers service, with particular reference to strategic planning. [29707]

Mr. Paice: The duty to provide careers services in England was transferred to the Secretary of State from local education authorities by section 45 of the Trade Union Reform and Employment Rights Act 1993. Provision of a careers service is no longer an LEA duty. However, in the majority of the new careers service companies, local education authorities are involved in the partnerships.

Mr. Eastham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what safeguards her Department took in respect of a possible conflict of interest when the careers service inspector who drew up the guidelines for the content and quality of bids for the careers service for the Bolton, Bury and Rochdale area took employment with the Nord Anglia careers service company; and if she will make a statement. [29705]

Mr. Paice: Guidelines for the assessment of the quality and content of bids for careers service contracts are of national application and were decided centrally. The individual to whom the hon. Member refers advised on some aspects of their development and only as part of a team. The Department was aware of his intention to seek alternative employment before his contract expired and took positive steps to ensure that he had no involvement with the contract negotiations for new services.

Mr. Eastham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will make a statement on the future role of the careers service inspectorate. [29709]

Mr. Paice: Since the enactment of the Trade Union Reform and Employment Rights Act 1993, the role of the careers service inspectorate—led by the chief inspector—has been to establish arrangements for assessing the performance of careers services against the standards set by the Secretary of State. This includes developing and managing a process for auditing careers services' quality management systems, the direct assessment of aspects of careers service performance and reporting to the Secretary of State on whether the statutory duty has been met. There are no plans to change this role.

Mr. Eastham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what safeguards her Department took in respect of the possibility of a conflict of interest when the official who had been the point of contact between the Government office north-west and bidders for the careers service for the Bolton, Bury and Rochdale area took early retirement and a job with Nord Anglia careers service company; and if she will make a statement. [29703]

Mr. Paice: All civil servants, including those who have recently left the civil service, are subject to standard terms and conditions which cover their subsequent employment outside the civil service. The official in question has notified the Government office for the north-west that she has been offered a job with Nord Anglia Ltd., and she is currently seeking clearance before taking up this appointment.

Mr. Eastham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans she has to ensure stable long-term funding for the careers service. [29711]

Mr. Paice: The Department's 1996 departmental report shows the Government's intention to invest in excess of £200 million per annum on the careers service to 1998–99. Plans for funding in future years will depend on the outcome of the annual public expenditure survey.

Mr. Eastham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what provision her Department has made to preserve the objectivity and impartiality of the careers service following its contracting out. [29706]

Mr. Paice: Careers services are contractually bound to provide their services in an impartial and unbiased way. The careers service inspectorate—led by the chief inspector—has established arrangements for assessing the performance of careers services against these and other standards set by the Secretary of State.

Mr. Eastham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what monitoring is carried out of career guidance standards *(a)* nationally and *(b)* locally; and if she will make a statement. [29702]

Mr. Paice: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State sets the requirements for careers guidance provided by careers services in the requirements and guidance for careers service providers and other documentation. The requirements and guidance for providers specifies the need for all services to have a quality management system, which is monitored locally by staff in Government offices within a national system developed by the chief inspector of careers services. The chief inspector also manages a programme of inspections of aspects of the guidance process in a nation sample of services. The findings of both local and national monitoring are set out in the chief inspector's annual report on the careers service to the Secretary of State, a copy of which is placed in the Library.

Mr. Eastham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans she has to ensure that the careers service caters to the needs of adults. [29710]

Mr. Paice: The Trade Union Reform and Employment Rights Act 1993 provides that adults in full-time education and part-time vocational education, except higher education are in the careers service client group.

Mr. Eastham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations she has received about the bidding process for the careers service for the Bolton, Bury and Rochdale area. [29704]

Mr. Paice: Letters from two Members of Parliament were received by the Secretary of State in support of a partnership bid by the two local education authorities and

training and enterprise council that cover the Bolton and Bury bidding area in the third round of competitive tendering for the provision of careers services in England.

School Leavers

Mr. Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will list *(a)* by local education authority and *(b)* in total, broken down in each case by gender, the number and percentage of 16-year-olds who left school with no formal qualifications in each of the last five years. [29639]

Mr. Paice: Information on school leavers is no longer collected by the Department. The table lists the number and percentage of 15-year-old—age at the beginning of the academic year—pupils who achieved no GCSE qualifications in each local education authority in England for 1991–92 to 1994–95.

GCSE achievements of 15-year-old[1] pupils in maintained schools[2] 1991–92 to 1994–95
Pupils with no GCSE qualifications

	1991–92						1992–93					
	Number of pupils with no GCSE qualification			As percentage of 15-year-olds			Number of pupils with no GCSE qualification			As percentage of 15-year-olds		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Camden	125	98	223	18.9	10.0	13.6	91	80	171	14.4	8.4	10.8
Greenwich	229	142	371	19.6	11.9	15.7	154	132	286	13.8	11.3	12.5
Hackney	157	98	255	25.6	12.6	18.3	82	62	144	15.8	8.1	11.2
Hammersmith	109	61	170	20.4	12.6	16.7	49	59	108	9.7	12.4	11.0
Islington	168	119	287	23.5	24.0	23.7	127	86	213	18.2	18.0	18.1
Kensington and Chelsea	41	39	80	13.6	13.4	13.5	23	13	36	7.5	5.4	6.6
Lambeth	158	137	295	30.5	19.4	24.1	145	108	253	27.8	15.6	20.8
Lewisham	146	116	262	14.3	12.7	13.5	103	91	194	11.1	10.3	10.7
Southwark	187	152	339	20.9	18.3	19.7	113	91	204	14.0	11.2	12.6
Tower Hamlets	249	157	406	23.7	17.0	20.5	157	139	296	15.2	14.4	14.8
Wandsworth	107	76	183	13.2	10.8	12.1	108	55	163	13.7	8.6	11.4
Westminster	91	64	155	14.9	11.0	13.0	75	59	134	12.5	10.0	11.2
Barking	128	83	211	15.7	10.6	13.2	91	56	147	11.2	8.3	9.9
Barnet	177	108	285	11.9	7.7	9.9	123	82	205	8.7	5.8	7.2
Bexley	91	64	155	6.9	5.5	6.3	59	56	115	5.1	4.9	5.0
Brent	99	85	184	10.7	9.9	10.3	94	80	174	10.4	9.1	9.8
Bromley	136	61	197	11.0	5.0	8.1	71	56	127	5.5	4.4	5.0
Croydon	122	71	193	8.6	5.1	6.8	112	99	211	7.6	7.2	7.4
Ealing	174	106	280	14.9	9.9	12.5	130	126	256	11.8	11.5	11.6
Enfield	138	87	225	9.6	6.7	8.2	96	73	169	7.2	5.5	6.3
Haringey	177	107	284	21.4	15.4	18.7	157	72	229	19.5	10.4	15.3
Harrow	65	48	113	7.0	5.2	6.1	48	44	92	5.1	4.9	5.0
Havering	89	68	157	6.5	4.9	5.7	70	40	110	5.1	3.1	4.1
Hillingdon	114	63	177	9.9	5.9	8.0	79	60	139	7.2	5.7	6.5
Hounslow	128	70	198	12.7	6.8	9.7	112	87	199	10.7	8.5	9.6
Kingston upon Thames	53	26	79	9.0	4.1	6.5	49	30	79	9.1	5.1	7.0
Merton	81	64	145	10.5	9.5	10.0	59	57	116	9.0	8.6	8.8
Newham	227	173	400	19.4	14.8	17.1	159	112	271	13.8	10.3	12.1
Redbridge	110	66	176	8.9	6.1	7.6	78	63	141	6.6	5.6	6.1
Richmond upon Thames	54	48	102	8.3	7.8	8.1	44	32	76	6.3	4.9	5.6
Sutton	51	45	96	5.9	5.5	5.7	63	32	95	7.2	3.8	5.5
Waltham Forest	102	70	172	9.7	7.4	8.6	98	53	151	9.5	5.6	7.6
Birmingham	898	601	1,499	15.5	11.1	13.4	803	531	1,334	14.4	10.5	12.5
Coventry	152	105	257	9.6	6.7	8.2	150	120	270	9.4	8.2	8.8
Dudley	93	43	136	5.3	2.7	4.0	79	46	125	4.8	3.1	4.0
Sandwell	172	161	333	9.9	9.9	9.9	175	131	306	11.3	8.2	9.7
Solihull	55	30	85	4.4	2.5	3.4	57	27	84	4.6	2.3	3.5
Walsall	185	143	328	10.9	8.9	9.9	177	113	290	11.0	7.6	9.4
Wolverhampton	173	111	284	12.1	8.3	10.2	130	75	205	9.8	5.6	7.7
Knowsley	187	156	343	20.6	18.2	19.5	200	119	319	24.2	16.6	20.7
Liverpool	501	318	819	20.0	13.1	16.6	438	322	760	19.2	13.8	16.5
St. Helens	130	96	226	11.5	9.0	10.3	92	78	170	8.9	7.8	8.4
Sefton	156	90	246	10.1	5.7	7.9	155	97	252	9.9	6.5	8.3
Wirral	167	115	282	9.0	6.7	7.9	143	91	234	8.7	5.5	7.1
Bolton	172	124	296	10.5	8.4	9.5	135	121	256	9.3	8.6	9.0
Bury	65	55	120	7.0	5.7	6.3	39	21	60	4.3	2.5	3.4
Manchester	537	405	942	25.0	20.8	23.0	458	331	789	22.9	17.2	20.1
Oldham	221	143	364	15.7	10.5	13.1	183	108	291	13.0	8.3	10.8
Rochdale	231	133	364	19.5	11.8	15.8	145	112	257	12.8	10.7	11.8
Salford	143	110	253	12.2	10.2	11.2	154	111	265	15.1	10.6	12.8
Stockport	110	65	175	7.3	4.5	6.0	71	54	125	5.1	4.2	4.6
Tameside	136	73	209	10.1	6.3	8.3	97	61	158	8.1	5.5	6.8
Trafford	83	59	142	9.1	6.1	7.5	75	38	113	8.2	4.0	6.1
Wigan	134	86	220	7.3	4.7	6.0	99	80	179	5.6	4.6	5.1
Barnsley	130	104	234	10.5	9.2	9.9	115	84	199	10.6	7.8	9.2
Doncaster	221	161	382	12.3	9.5	10.9	178	113	291	11.1	7.1	9.1

GCSE achievements of 15-year-old[1] pupils in maintained schools[2] 1991–92 to 1994–95
Pupils with no GCSE qualifications

	1991–92						1992–93					
	Number of pupils with no GCSE qualification			As percentage of 15-year-olds			Number of pupils with no GCSE qualification			As percentage of 15-year-olds		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Rotherham	120	96	216	7.7	6.3	7.0	92	85	177	6.2	5.9	6.1
Sheffield	378	217	595	14.5	9.1	11.9	282	170	452	11.2	7.5	9.5
Bradford	396	277	673	13.9	10.4	12.2	361	266	627	12.5	10.4	11.5
Calderdale	142	73	215	13.0	6.5	9.7	87	64	151	8.5	6.1	7.3
Kirklees	245	159	404	10.9	7.5	9.2	228	116	344	11.1	6.0	8.6
Leeds	497	293	790	12.7	8.0	10.5	397	295	692	11.4	8.5	10.0
Wakefield	179	131	310	10.0	7.8	8.9	164	98	262	9.5	6.4	8.0
Gateshead	109	90	199	10.6	8.2	9.4	125	81	206	12.7	8.6	10.7
Newcastle upon Tyne	199	167	366	15.2	12.5	13.9	189	153	342	14.9	13.0	14.0
North Tyneside	77	98	175	8.1	9.6	8.9	87	59	146	9.0	6.4	7.7
South Tyneside	81	43	124	9.3	5.1	7.3	59	49	108	7.5	6.3	6.9
Sunderland	178	97	275	10.3	5.5	7.9	171	122	293	10.7	7.4	9.0
Isles of Scilly	0	0	0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0	0	0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Avon	431	219	650	8.9	4.9	7.0	352	200	552	7.6	4.6	6.1
Bedfordshire	196	119	315	6.5	4.3	5.4	171	128	299	5.9	4.5	5.2
Berkshire	325	190	515	8.0	5.1	6.6	223	175	398	5.8	4.8	5.3
Buckinghamshire	231	177	408	6.6	5.2	5.9	205	132	337	5.9	3.8	4.8
Cambridgeshire	283	166	449	7.7	4.9	6.4	248	171	419	7.2	5.2	6.2
Cheshire	408	291	699	7.3	5.4	6.4	319	205	524	6.1	4.0	5.1
Cleveland	456	303	759	13.0	8.9	11.0	382	297	679	11.7	9.1	10.4
Cornwall	138	98	236	5.5	3.9	4.7	114	73	187	4.6	3.0	3.8
Cumbria	220	145	365	8.3	5.6	7.0	176	110	286	6.7	4.4	5.6
Derbyshire	379	200	579	7.2	4.0	5.6	302	180	482	6.0	3.8	4.9
Devon	332	219	551	6.5	4.4	5.5	259	201	460	5.3	4.2	4.7
Dorset	154	118	272	4.8	3.8	4.3	161	102	263	5.1	3.4	4.3
Durham	292	196	488	8.6	6.1	7.4	258	179	437	8.2	5.8	7.0
East Sussex	241	103	344	8.3	3.7	6.1	218	142	360	7.6	5.3	6.5
Essex	636	444	1,080	7.3	5.3	6.3	580	414	994	6.9	5.2	6.0
Gloucestershire	140	138	278	4.9	5.0	5.0	145	83	228	5.5	3.2	4.4
Hampshire	579	425	1,004	7.4	5.5	6.4	484	300	784	6.2	4.1	5.2
Hereford and Worcester	270	186	456	7.5	5.2	6.3	228	144	372	6.4	4.3	5.3
Hertfordshire	460	236	696	8.4	4.5	6.5	362	234	596	6.9	4.5	5.7
Humberside	499	383	882	9.5	7.5	8.5	490	335	825	9.5	7.1	8.4
Isle of Wight	31	20	51	4.8	3.1	4.0	28	24	52	4.4	4.0	4.2
Kent	796	498	1,294	9.2	6.0	7.7	613	365	978	7.4	4.5	6.0
Lancashire	795	537	1,332	10.1	7.0	8.6	626	434	1,060	8.4	6.1	7.3
Leicestershire	422	312	734	8.4	6.6	7.5	335	248	583	6.7	5.4	6.1
Lincolnshire	241	146	387	7.3	4.6	6.0	247	116	363	7.8	3.8	5.8
Norfolk	276	230	506	7.1	6.0	6.5	245	188	433	6.3	5.2	5.7
North Yorkshire	216	140	356	5.8	3.9	4.9	143	117	260	4.0	3.3	3.7
Northamptonshire	198	161	359	5.8	4.7	5.3	190	116	306	5.9	3.6	4.8
Northumberland	143	76	219	7.7	4.4	6.1	132	66	198	7.3	4.1	5.8
Nottinghamshire	547	344	891	9.7	6.4	8.1	447	308	755	8.4	6.1	7.3
Oxfordshire	231	116	347	8.3	4.5	6.4	152	91	243	5.6	3.6	4.6
Shropshire	136	74	210	5.5	3.3	4.4	107	62	169	4.7	2.9	3.8
Somerset	130	84	214	5.4	3.6	4.6	94	46	140	4.0	2.2	3.1
Staffordshire	541	320	861	9.0	5.7	7.4	421	216	637	7.6	4.1	5.9
Suffolk	132	125	257	3.9	3.9	3.9	131	95	226	4.0	2.9	3.4
Surrey	283	190	473	6.6	4.6	5.7	243	159	402	5.9	4.1	5.0
Warwickshire	143	108	251	5.4	4.2	4.9	146	89	235	5.8	3.7	4.7
West Sussex	192	152	344	5.5	4.5	5.0	179	109	288	5.1	3.2	4.2
Wiltshire	120	115	235	4.3	4.0	4.1	106	91	197	3.7	3.3	3.5
Totals (all Local Education Authorities)	23,979	16,104	40,083	9.4	6.6	8.1	19,871	13,572	33,443	8.2	5.8	7.0

[1] Age as at the beginning of the academic year.
[2] Includes LEA-maintained schools, grant-maintained schools, maintained special schools and city technology colleges.

GCSE achievements of 15-year-old[1] pupils in maintained schools[2] 1991–92 to 1994–95
Pupils with no GCSE qualifications

	1993–94						1994–95					
	Number of pupils with no GCSE qualification			As percentage of 15-year-olds			Number of pupils with no GCSE qualification			As percentage of 15-year-olds		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Camden	97	92	189	14.4	9.1	11.3	110	98	208	15.5	9.9	12.2
Greenwich	191	144	335	16.8	12.3	14.6	208	174	382	16.3	13.5	14.9
Hackney	88	64	152	15.2	8.6	11.5	67	53	120	11.8	6.6	8.7

GCSE achievements of 15-year-old[1] pupils in maintained schools[2] 1991–92 to 1994–95
Pupils with no GCSE qualifications

	1993–94						1994–95					
	Number of pupils with no GCSE qualification			As percentage of 15-year-olds			Number of pupils with no GCSE qualification			As percentage of 15-year-olds		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Hammersmith	65	54	119	12.1	10.5	11.3	80	64	144	14.5	12.9	13.7
Islington	101	66	167	15.2	14.4	14.8	116	88	204	16.0	16.0	16.0
Kensington and Chelsea	34	30	64	12.3	12.4	12.3	19	30	49	7.4	12.7	9.9
Lambeth	117	75	192	23.1	10.8	16.0	77	73	150	14.5	10.5	12.2
Lewisham	98	70	168	10.0	8.1	9.1	97	74	171	9.4	7.7	8.6
Southwark	108	146	254	12.4	16.7	14.6	159	65	224	18.6	7.9	13.4
Tower Hamlets	132	80	212	14.3	9.3	11.9	151	86	237	14.7	8.8	11.8
Wandsworth	114	64	178	14.2	10.3	12.5	102	55	157	12.0	7.5	9.9
Westminster	82	65	147	14.5	10.6	12.5	93	78	171	16.0	12.1	14.0
Barking	103	62	165	12.4	8.7	10.7	129	78	207	14.6	9.6	12.2
Barnet	113	73	186	7.3	5.3	6.3	131	80	211	8.4	5.3	6.9
Bexley	82	74	156	6.7	6.1	6.4	66	65	131	5.3	5.3	5.3
Brent	77	46	123	8.5	5.4	7.0	94	59	153	9.5	6.1	7.8
Bromley	67	50	117	5.0	4.0	4.5	79	68	147	5.6	4.6	5.1
Croydon	148	106	254	9.7	7.4	8.6	159	112	271	10.0	7.2	8.6
Ealing	109	103	212	9.2	8.9	9.1	144	90	234	12.1	7.2	9.6
Enfield	97	81	178	6.8	5.9	6.3	122	104	226	7.8	7.0	7.4
Haringey	103	82	185	14.2	10.6	12.4	165	116	281	18.6	14.6	16.7
Harrow	63	38	101	6.5	3.9	5.2	71	55	126	6.6	5.5	6.1
Havering	106	58	164	7.9	4.6	6.3	89	56	145	6.2	4.0	5.1
Hillingdon	106	66	172	9.3	6.0	7.7	91	72	163	7.8	5.6	6.7
Hounslow	133	102	235	11.1	8.8	10.0	155	90	245	11.5	7.5	9.7
Kingston upoon Thames	43	47	90	7.7	7.7	7.7	63	45	108	9.8	6.2	7.9
Merton	66	66	132	9.7	9.7	9.7	68	72	140	8.7	10.2	9.4
Newham	155	119	274	13.8	10.2	12.0	170	124	294	13.3	9.7	11.5
Redbridge	83	41	124	6.8	3.7	5.3	72	60	132	5.6	5.0	5.3
Richmond upon Thames	55	48	103	8.1	6.7	7.4	39	25	64	5.3	3.6	4.5
Sutton	51	46	97	5.9	5.3	5.6	56	52	108	5.8	5.9	5.8
Waltham Forest	132	59	191	12.5	5.69	9.3	133	87	220	11.4	7.9	9.7
Birmingham	823	572	1,395	15.0	11.0	13.1	847	606	1,453	14.6	11.1	12.9
Coventry	154	126	280	10.1	8.5	9.3	176	120	296	10.2	7.3	8.8
Dudley	143	72	215	8.0	4.6	6.4	168	115	283	9.2	6.6	8.0
Sandwell	202	145	347	12.2	9.6	10.9	214	182	396	11.7	10.4	11.1
Solihull	43	43	86	3.4	3.5	3.5	69	39	108	5.0	2.6	3.8
Walsall	179	133	312	10.9	8.7	9.9	228	144	372	12.9	8.5	10.8
Wolverhampton	178	117	295	13.3	8.8	11.0	202	171	373	13.6	11.8	12.8
Knowsley	179	142	321	22.7	17.8	20.2	193	149	342	20.8	16.8	18.8
Liverpool	432	356	788	18.1	14.6	16.3	502	371	873	18.0	14.1	16.1
St. Helens	95	79	174	9.0	8.1	8.6	110	73	183	9.4	7.0	8.3
Sefton	132	110	242	8.1	7.1	7.6	153	129	282	8.9	7.5	8.2
Wirral	184	147	331	10.7	8.7	9.7	170	115	285	8.6	6.1	7.4
Bolton	161	109	270	10.3	7.6	9.0	169	116	285	10.2	7.7	9.0
Bury	37	24	61	4.1	2.6	3.4	59	23	82	5.5	2.4	4.0
Manchester	426	327	753	21.8	17.3	19.6	443	322	765	21.7	16.4	19.1
Oldham	186	157	343	13.0	10.9	12.0	226	156	382	14.0	10.4	12.2
Rochdale	141	102	243	12.7	9.6	11.2	153	126	279	12.4	10.8	11.6
Salford	161	130	291	15.1	12.6	13.9	204	168	372	17.2	14.7	16.0
Stockport	90	70	160	6.5	4.9	5.7	114	58	172	7.3	4.3	5.9
Tameside	111	81	192	9.2	6.7	8.0	130	90	220	9.6	7.0	8.3
Trafford	90	64	154	9.6	6.5	8.0	73	56	129	6.9	5.1	6.0
Wigan	139	93	232	7.9	5.3	6.6	168	106	274	8.4	5.5	7.0
Barnsley	162	96	258	13.8	8.6	11.3	165	104	269	13.2	8.2	10.7
Doncaster	239	176	415	13.6	10.9	12.3	261	166	427	14.3	10.5	12.5
Rotherham	178	129	307	11.5	8.7	10.1	179	130	309	10.9	7.8	9.3
Sheffield	270	242	512	11.1	10.2	10.6	312	282	594	11.9	11.2	11.5
Bradford	339	281	620	11.8	10.5	11.2	411	307	718	13.2	10.8	12.1
Calderdale	112	84	196	10.4	8.4	9.4	131	84	215	10.5	7.4	9.0
Kirklees	247	142	389	11.6	7.2	9.5	286	189	475	12.2	8.6	10.5
Leeds	446	373	819	12.4	10.5	11.4	462	385	847	11.8	10.4	11.1
Wakefield	187	116	303	11.4	7.5	9.5	172	128	300	9.6	6.9	8.3
Gateshead	135	104	239	13.1	10.9	12.1	144	122	266	12.2	10.6	11.4
Newcastle upon Tyne	240	192	432	18.7	16.2	17.5	269	207	476	19.2	15.4	17.3
North Tyneside	81	84	165	8.3	9.1	8.7	116	87	203	10.0	8.3	9.2
South Tyneside	83	61	144	9.7	7.5	8.7	73	75	148	7.6	7.8	7.7
Sunderland	177	173	350	10.1	9.8	9.9	237	154	391	12.0	8.1	10.1
Isles of Scilly	0	0	0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0	0	0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Avon	365	268	633	7.7	6.0	6.9	385	257	642	7.6	5.4	6.5
Bedfordshire	186	142	328	6.2	4.8	5.5	222	127	349	6.7	4.0	5.3
Berkshire	254	169	423	6.5	4.4	5.4	300	186	486	6.9	4.6	5.8

GCSE achievements of 15-year-old[1] pupils in maintained schools[2] 1991–92 to 1994–95
Pupils with no GCSE qualifications

	1993–94						1994–95					
	Number of pupils with no GCSE qualification			As percentage of 15-year-olds			Number of pupils with no GCSE qualification			As percentage of 15-year-olds		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Buckinghamshire	227	134	361	6.2	4.0	5.1	276	179	455	7.0	4.7	5.9
Cambridgeshire	247	205	452	7.1	6.2	6.7	265	192	457	7.0	5.3	6.2
Cheshire	325	261	586	6.2	5.0	5.6	349	261	610	5.9	4.5	5.3
Cleveland	399	354	753	11.5	10.7	11.1	483	396	879	12.9	10.7	11.8
Cornwall	98	78	176	3.9	3.2	3.5	100	80	180	3.6	3.0	3.3
Cumbria	212	148	360	7.7	5.9	6.8	214	160	374	7.9	6.1	7.0
Derbyshire	345	258	603	6.9	5.3	6.1	422	272	694	7.5	5.3	6.4
Devon	275	226	501	5.5	4.6	5.1	328	238	566	5.8	4.5	5.2
Dorset	162	128	290	5.0	4.1	4.5	184	128	312	5.1	3.9	4.6
Durham	349	261	610	10.7	8.1	9.4	413	288	701	10.9	8.2	9.6
East Sussex	236	181	417	7.8	6.5	7.2	273	223	496	8.1	7.2	7.7
Essex	619	433	1,052	7.4	5.3	6.4	618	502	1,120	6.9	5.8	6.4
Gloucestershire	126	109	235	4.7	4.0	4.4	164	107	271	5.5	3.7	4.6
Hampshire	454	349	803	5.8	4.6	5.2	478	365	843	5.9	4.5	5.2
Hereford and Worcester	253	170	423	7.2	4.8	6.0	279	237	516	7.2	6.2	6.7
Hertfordshire	313	253	566	6.0	4.8	5.4	375	290	665	6.4	5.1	5.8
Humberside	583	408	991	11.6	8.6	10.1	599	464	1,063	10.8	8.8	9.8
Isle of Wight	35	25	60	5.2	4.0	4.6	43	35	78	5.9	5.6	5.8
Kent	635	410	1,045	7.5	5.1	6.4	663	489	1,152	7.3	5.5	6.4
Lancashire	627	527	1,154	8.2	7.4	7.8	713	550	1,263	8.7	7.0	7.9
Leicestershire	388	276	664	8.1	5.8	6.9	439	332	771	8.2	6.5	7.3
Lincolnshire	247	178	425	7.6	5.6	6.6	246	214	460	7.1	6.2	6.7
Norfolk	306	207	513	7.9	5.5	6.7	303	246	549	7.3	6.2	6.8
North Yorkshire	222	162	384	6.0	4.5	5.3	242	156	398	5.9	3.9	4.9
Northamptonshire	199	155	354	5.8	4.8	5.3	259	202	461	7.2	5.7	6.4
Northumberland	160	136	296	8.8	7.7	8.2	152	127	279	7.4	6.5	6.9
Nottinghamshire	555	410	965	10.2	7.8	9.0	629	473	1,102	11.0	8.5	9.8
Oxfordshire	241	119	360	8.6	4.6	6.7	266	154	420	9.2	5.4	7.3
Shropshire	111	67	178	4.7	3.1	3.9	162	111	273	6.3	4.5	5.4
Somerset	107	68	175	4.5	3.1	3.8	128	65	193	5.2	2.8	4.0
Staffordshire	510	339	849	9.0	6.3	7.7	518	372	890	8.4	6.2	7.3
Suffolk	133	100	233	4.1	3.2	3.7	153	129	282	4.2	3.7	4.0
Surrey	241	163	404	5.8	4.0	4.9	317	187	504	6.8	4.2	5.5
Warwickshire	191	100	291	7.4	4.1	5.8	182	130	312	6.8	4.9	5.9
West Sussex	204	150	354	5.7	4.4	5.1	209	167	376	5.4	4.4	4.9
Wiltshire	146	106	252	5.1	3.9	4.5	163	117	280	5.2	3.9	4.6
Total (all local education authorities)	21,587	16,002	37,589	8.7	6.7	7.7	23,878	17,511	41,389	8.9	6.8	7.8

[1] Age as at the beginning of the academic year.
[2] Includes LEA-maintained schools, grant-maintained schools, maintained special schools and city technology colleges.

Mr. Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will list *(a)* by LEA and *(b)* in total, broken down in each case by gender, the number and percentage of 16-year-olds who left school with fewer than five passes at grades A to C in each of the last five years. [29640]

Mr. Paice: Information on school leavers is no longer collected by the Department. The following tables list the number and percentage of 15-year-old—age as at the beginning of the academic year—pupils who achieved fewer than five GCSE grades A*–C in each local education authority in England for 1991–92 to 1994–95.

GCSE achievements of 15-year-old[1] pupils in maintained schools[2] 1991–92 to 1994–95
Pupils with fewer than five GCSE passes at grades A–C

	1991–92						1992–93					
	Number of pupils with fewer than five A–C			As percentage of 15-year-olds			Number of pupils with fewer than five A–C			As percentage of 15-year-olds		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Camden	480	594	1,074	72.5	60.7	65.5	441	548	989	69.8	57.6	62.5
Greenwich	955	858	1,813	81.7	71.7	76.6	873	819	1,692	78.1	70.1	74.0
Hackney	525	598	1,123	85.6	76.7	80.6	416	561	977	80.2	73.6	76.3
Hammersmith	395	349	744	73.8	72.3	73.1	378	331	709	74.6	69.4	72.1
Islington	585	388	973	81.9	78.4	80.5	565	377	942	80.9	78.7	80.0
Kensington and Chelsea	206	221	427	68.2	75.7	71.9	211	169	380	68.7	69.8	69.2
Lambeth	458	543	1,001	88.4	76.9	81.8	447	511	958	85.8	73.7	78.9
Lewisham	813	636	1,449	79.4	69.7	74.8	744	605	1,349	80.3	68.7	74.6
Southwark	784	678	1,462	87.8	81.7	84.9	679	646	1,325	83.8	79.8	81.8
Tower Hamlets	903	758	1,661	85.8	81.9	84.0	864	758	1,622	83.5	78.5	81.1

GCSE achievements of 15-year-old[1] pupils in maintained schools[2] 1991–92 to 1994–95
Pupils with fewer than five GCSE passes at grades A–C

	1991–92						1992–93					
	Number of pupils with fewer than five A–C			As percentage of 15-year-olds			Number of pupils with fewer than five A–C			As percentage of 15-year-olds		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Wandsworth	629	492	1,121	77.4	69.8	73.8	595	431	1,026	75.5	67.6	71.9
Westminster	500	407	907	81.7	70.2	76.1	466	410	876	77.5	69.3	73.4
Barking	705	642	1,347	86.7	82.1	84.5	682	515	1,197	84.0	76.3	80.5
Barnet	937	712	1,649	63.1	51.0	57.2	893	647	1,540	63.2	45.8	54.5
Bexley	935	687	1,622	71.4	59.2	65.7	764	640	1,404	65.8	56.2	61.0
Brent	702	569	1,271	75.9	66.1	71.2	657	548	1,205	72.8	62.1	67.5
Bromley	763	599	1,362	61.8	49.5	55.8	752	654	1,406	58.1	51.5	54.8
Croydon	1,002	754	1,756	70.3	53.7	62.0	1,033	739	1,772	70.0	53.8	62.2
Ealing	892	745	1,637	76.6	69.6	73.2	843	747	1,590	76.4	68.0	72.2
Enfield	1,022	836	1,858	70.8	64.1	67.6	898	775	1,673	67.1	58.6	62.8
Haringey	668	488	1,156	80.7	70.4	76.0	646	484	1,130	80.0	69.8	75.3
Harrow	538	458	996	58.2	49.6	53.9	579	435	1,014	61.7	48.9	55.5
Havering	902	803	1,705	65.5	57.7	61.6	856	713	1,569	62.2	54.8	58.6
Hillingdon	815	615	1,430	71.1	58.0	64.8	744	619	1,363	67.9	58.8	63.5
Hounslow	708	622	1,330	70.0	60.2	65.1	735	601	1,336	70.4	58.7	64.6
Kingston upon Thames	347	307	654	59.0	48.7	53.7	276	259	535	51.2	44.2	47.6
Merton	539	425	964	69.9	63.2	66.8	467	408	875	71.1	61.6	66.3
Newham	970	888	1,858	82.9	75.8	79.3	968	782	1,750	83.8	71.8	78.0
Redbridge	828	620	1,448	67.3	57.4	62.7	757	616	1,373	63.7	55.0	59.5
Richmond upon Thames	408	320	728	62.6	52.1	57.5	417	328	745	60.2	50.2	55.3
Sutton	500	418	918	57.5	51.2	54.4	441	413	854	50.2	49.5	49.9
Waltham Forest	822	659	1,481	78.3	69.7	74.2	770	592	1,362	74.5	62.7	68.9
Birmingham	4,486	3,901	8,387	77.4	72.3	74.9	4,262	3,534	7,796	76.2	69.7	73.1
Coventry	1,127	992	2,119	71.1	63.3	67.2	1,142	896	2,038	71.4	61.4	66.6
Dudley	1,205	979	2,184	68.1	61.4	64.9	1,100	839	1,939	66.9	56.5	62.0
Sandwell	1,398	1,232	2,630	80.3	75.8	78.1	1,266	1,193	2,459	81.4	74.4	77.9
Solihull	808	638	1,446	64.1	52.3	58.3	757	577	1,334	61.2	50.2	55.9
Walsall	1,226	1,043	2,269	72.0	64.9	68.6	1,190	965	2,155	74.1	65.3	69.9
Wolverhampton	1,135	953	2,088	79.4	71.0	75.3	1,005	876	1,881	76.1	64.8	70.4
Knowsley	771	703	1,474	85.0	82.2	83.7	711	576	1,287	86.1	80.2	83.4
Liverpool	2,048	1,834	3,882	81.7	75.3	78.5	1,752	1,717	3,469	76.6	73.8	75.2
St. Helens	837	693	1,530	73.8	64.9	69.5	732	639	1,371	70.7	64.0	67.4
Sefton	1,047	922	1,969	67.9	58.4	63.1	958	748	1,706	61.5	50.1	55.9
Wirral	1,215	1,047	2,262	65.6	61.0	63.4	1,039	964	2,003	63.4	57.8	60.6
Bolton	1,150	864	2,014	70.1	58.7	64.7	955	818	1,773	66.0	58.3	62.2
Bury	598	534	1,132	64.2	55.1	59.5	556	391	947	61.2	45.8	53.8
Manchester	1,823	1,511	3,334	84.8	77.6	81.4	1,665	1,459	3,124	83.2	75.6	79.5
Oldham	1,109	918	2,027	78.5	67.2	72.9	1,022	801	1,823	72.7	61.7	67.4
Rochdale	922	788	1,710	78.0	69.9	74.0	831	691	1,522	73.5	66.3	70.0
Salford	898	789	1,687	76.6	72.9	74.8	766	690	1,456	75.1	65.8	70.4
Stockport	954	786	1,740	63.7	54.8	59.3	811	648	1,459	58.0	50.1	54.2
Tameside	996	762	1,758	74.2	65.4	70.1	862	722	1,584	71.7	64.6	68.3
Trafford	635	562	1,197	69.5	57.6	63.4	593	506	1,099	65.0	53.3	59.1
Wigan	1,225	993	2,218	66.9	54.4	60.7	1,138	906	2,044	64.4	52.5	58.5
Barnsley	1,019	777	1,796	82.2	69.0	75.9	850	779	1,629	78.3	72.7	75.5
Doncaster	1,377	1,159	2,536	76.3	68.1	72.3	1,174	1,011	2,185	73.0	63.4	68.2
Rotherham	1,148	1,023	2,171	73.3	67.1	70.3	1,033	884	1,917	70.1	61.5	65.8
Sheffield	1,946	1,591	3,537	74.5	66.8	70.8	1,803	1,369	3,172	71.9	60.5	66.5
Bradford	2,289	1,966	4,255	80.4	73.9	77.3	2,260	1,824	4,084	78.0	71.0	74.7
Calderdale	796	686	1,482	72.8	61.4	67.0	747	625	1,372	73.2	59.8	66.4
Kirklees	1,640	1,357	2,997	72.6	64.1	68.5	1,461	1,119	2,580	70.8	58.0	64.6
Leeds	2,894	2,299	5,193	73.9	63.1	68.7	2,461	2,140	4,601	70.8	61.8	66.3
Wakefield	1,386	1,121	2,507	77.5	66.6	72.2	1,242	1,004	2,246	71.8	65.4	68.8
Gateshead	778	736	1,514	76.0	67.3	71.5	688	590	1,278	69.8	62.6	66.3
Newcastle upon Tyne	983	945	1,928	75.3	71.0	73.1	914	793	1,707	72.0	67.1	69.6
North Tyneside	650	637	1,287	68.6	62.1	65.3	648	536	1,184	67.2	58.0	62.7
South Tyneside	631	567	1,198	72.8	67.3	70.1	577	489	1,066	73.0	63.3	68.2
Sunderland	1,314	1,186	2,500	76.4	67.4	71.8	1,189	1,063	2,252	74.6	64.3	69.4
Isles of Scilly	6	6	12	46.2	40.0	42.9	2	2	4	22.2	28.6	25.0
Avon	3,323	2,617	5,940	68.6	58.7	63.9	3,156	2,501	5,657	68.2	57.1	62.8
Bedfordshire	2,121	1,663	3,784	69.8	60.0	65.1	1,909	1,649	3,558	65.5	58.3	61.9
Berkshire	2,624	1,976	4,600	64.3	53.3	59.1	2,304	1,890	4,194	60.2	51.5	55.9
Buckinghamshire	2,101	1,698	3,799	59.8	50.0	55.0	2,026	1,683	3,709	58.0	48.4	53.2
Cambridgeshire	2,388	1,884	4,272	65.4	55.3	60.5	2,236	1,759	3,995	64.6	53.0	58.9
Cheshire	3,538	2,884	6,422	63.6	53.9	58.9	3,172	2,582	5,754	60.8	50.2	55.6
Cleveland	2,596	2,263	4,859	73.7	66.5	70.2	2,361	2,110	4,471	72.5	65.0	68.7
Cornwall	1,695	1,408	3,103	68.0	55.9	61.9	1,589	1,262	2,851	64.0	52.4	58.3
Cumbria	1,769	1,499	3,268	67.0	58.0	62.5	1,668	1,367	3,035	63.7	55.1	59.5
Derbyshire	3,581	2,969	6,550	67.8	59.7	63.9	3,398	2,680	6,078	67.5	56.6	62.2

GCSE achievements of 15-year-old[1] pupils in maintained schools[2] 1991–92 to 1994–95
Pupils with fewer than five GCSE passes at grades A–C

	1991–92						1992–93					
	Number of pupils with fewer than five A–C			As percentage of 15-year-olds			Number of pupils with fewer than five A–C			As percentage of 15-year-olds		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Devon	3,414	2,850	6,264	67.3	57.0	62.2	3,201	2,566	5,767	65.1	53.7	59.5
Dorset	2,051	1,713	3,764	63.4	55.0	59.3	1,899	1,503	3,402	60.4	50.6	55.7
Durham	2,430	2,073	4,503	71.8	64.4	68.2	2,209	1,870	4,079	70.6	60.7	65.7
East Sussex	1,904	1,497	3,401	65.5	53.9	59.9	1,774	1,425	3,199	62.0	53.4	57.9
Essex	5,894	4,864	10,758	67.9	58.3	63.2	5,537	4,486	10,023	65.6	56.0	61.0
Gloucestershire	1,783	1,423	3,206	62.8	51.4	57.2	1,603	1,290	2,893	60.3	49.9	55.2
Hampshire	5,129	4,308	9,437	65.4	55.7	60.6	4,998	3,850	8,848	64.5	52.0	58.4
Hereford and Worcester	2,481	2,000	4,481	68.6	55.6	62.1	2,314	1,836	4,150	64.6	54.3	59.6
Hertfordshire	3,376	2,667	6,043	61.8	50.7	56.4	3,206	2,530	5,736	60.9	49.1	55.1
Humberside	3,854	3,329	7,183	73.0	65.3	69.2	3,710	3,054	6,764	72.2	65.0	68.8
Isle of Wight	434	404	838	67.6	63.5	65.6	446	358	804	69.6	59.8	64.8
Kent	5,819	4,806	10,625	67.5	58.3	63.0	5,369	4,574	9,943	65.2	56.7	61.0
Lancashire	5,364	4,499	9,863	67.8	59.0	63.5	4,847	3,931	8,778	65.3	55.7	60.6
Leicestershire	3,595	2,918	6,513	71.2	62.0	66.8	3,351	2,623	5,974	67.1	57.3	62.4
Lincolnshire	2,241	1,872	4,113	67.6	59.1	63.4	2,071	1,735	3,806	65.2	56.9	61.1
Norfolk	2,706	2,300	5,006	69.4	59.6	64.5	2,592	2,030	4,622	66.5	55.8	61.3
North Yorkshire	2,301	1,877	4,178	62.2	52.0	57.2	2,058	1,672	3,730	57.9	47.3	52.6
Northamptonshire	2,334	2,014	4,348	68.4	59.2	63.8	2,175	1,814	3,989	67.0	57.0	62.0
Northumberland	1,281	958	2,239	68.6	55.2	62.1	1,142	875	2,017	63.4	54.2	59.1
Nottinghamshire	4,184	3,551	7,735	74.3	65.9	70.2	3,779	3,140	6,919	71.0	62.6	66.9
Oxfordshire	1,765	1,393	3,158	63.2	53.8	58.7	1,625	1,274	2,899	60.1	50.0	55.2
Shropshire	1,629	1,241	2,870	65.8	54.5	60.4	1,411	1,093	2,504	61.7	51.6	56.8
Somerset	1,535	1,155	2,690	64.3	49.9	57.2	1,486	1,036	2,522	62.7	48.8	56.1
Staffordshire	4,297	3,428	7,725	71.8	61.5	66.8	3,808	3,040	6,848	69.2	57.6	63.5
Suffolk	2,283	1,748	4,031	66.8	54.8	61.0	2,074	1,633	3,707	63.1	49.9	56.5
Surrey	2,559	2,091	4,650	60.0	51.2	55.7	2,386	1,847	4,233	58.1	47.7	53.0
Warwickshire	1,801	1,459	3,260	68.4	57.4	63.0	1,677	1,318	2,995	66.0	54.1	60.2
West Sussex	2,089	1,612	3,701	59.6	47.8	53.8	2,031	1,604	3,635	58.2	47.3	52.8
Wiltshire	1,842	1,568	3,410	65.4	54.4	59.8	1,773	1,430	3,203	62.5	52.0	57.3
Total (All LEAs)	176,817	146,668	323,485	69.6	60.3	65.1	163,390	133,985	297,375	67.2	57.5	62.4

[1] Age as at the beginning of the academic year.
[2] Includes LEA-maintained schools, grant-maintained, maintained special schools and city technology college.

GCSE achievements of 15-year-old[1] pupils in maintained schools[2] 1991–92 to 1994–95
pupils with fewer than five GCSE passes at grades A–C*

	1993–94						1994–95					
	Number of pupils with fewer than five A*–C			As percentage of 15-year-olds			Number of pupils with fewer than five A*–C			As percentage of 15-year-olds		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Camden	446	552	998	66.3	54.9	59.4	446	551	997	62.9	55.4	58.5
Greenwich	886	793	1,679	78.1	68.0	73.0	944	892	1,836	74.2	69.2	71.7
Hackney	476	547	1,023	82.4	73.3	77.3	484	562	1,046	85.1	69.8	76.1
Hammersmith	378	336	714	70.5	65.5	68.1	403	312	715	73.0	62.8	68.2
Islington	531	348	879	79.7	75.8	78.1	611	441	1,052	84.5	80.2	82.6
Kensington and Chelsea	168	172	340	60.6	71.1	65.5	151	165	316	58.5	69.6	63.8
Lambeth	434	502	936	85.6	72.4	78.0	436	508	944	82.0	72.9	76.8
Lewisham	755	593	1,348	76.9	68.4	72.9	794	619	1,413	76.8	64.8	71.0
Southwark	723	699	1,422	83.3	80.1	81.7	715	590	1,305	83.7	71.7	77.8
Tower Hamlets	781	670	1,451	84.3	78.1	81.3	828	739	1,567	80.5	75.9	78.3
Wandsworth	616	393	1,009	76.8	63.2	70.9	642	468	1,110	75.5	63.6	70.0
Westminster	462	420	882	81.6	68.6	74.9	458	414	872	79.0	64.2	71.2
Barking	630	487	1,117	76.1	68.2	72.4	662	568	1,230	74.8	69.8	72.4
Barnet	881	554	1,435	56.7	40.2	48.9	828	626	1,454	53.2	41.3	47.3
Bexley	771	681	1,452	62.9	56.5	59.7	781	623	1,404	62.9	50.8	56.9
Brent	608	529	1,137	67.5	62.5	65.1	703	565	1,268	71.4	58.3	64.9
Bromley	736	583	1,319	54.6	46.7	50.8	791	718	1,509	56.4	49.0	52.6
Croydon	1,083	771	1,854	71.3	53.8	62.8	1,106	890	1,996	69.4	56.9	63.2
Ealing	852	733	1,585	72.2	63.2	67.8	878	742	1,620	74.0	59.5	66.5
Enfield	904	769	1,673	63.0	56.0	59.6	1,035	818	1,853	66.0	55.1	60.7
Haringey	556	514	1,070	76.8	66.7	71.6	698	521	1,219	78.6	65.7	72.5
Harrow	553	452	1,005	56.9	46.3	51.6	561	424	985	52.2	42.5	47.5
Havering	827	665	1,492	61.4	53.3	57.5	874	768	1,642	61.2	54.5	57.9
Hillingdon	785	607	1,392	68.9	55.5	62.3	781	740	1,521	66.8	57.9	62.2
Hounslow	777	631	1,408	64.8	54.5	59.7	904	644	1,548	67.3	53.9	61.0
Kingston upoon Thames	300	267	567	53.5	43.7	48.4	319	286	605	49.8	39.7	44.5
Merton	482	422	904	71.1	62.2	66.6	510	395	905	65.5	56.1	61.0

GCSE achievements of 15-year-old[1] pupils in maintained schools[2] 1991–92 to 1994–95
pupils with fewer than five GCSE passes at grades A–C*

	1993–94						1994–95					
	Number of pupils with fewer than five A*–C			As percentage of 15-year-olds			Number of pupils with fewer than five A*–C			As percentage of 15-year-olds		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Newham	920	841	1,761	81.8	72.4	77.0	1,035	917	1,952	81.0	71.5	76.3
Redbridge	725	521	1,246	59.6	46.8	53.5	750	624	1,374	57.9	51.8	54.9
Richmond upon Thames	372	326	698	54.5	45.6	50.0	427	308	735	58.4	44.9	51.9
Sutton	439	377	816	50.4	43.8	47.1	475	398	873	48.9	45.1	47.1
Waltham Forest	786	646	1,432	74.6	64.8	69.9	851	669	1,520	73.2	60.9	67.3
Birmingham	4,070	3,369	7,439	74.1	65.0	69.6	4,181	3,565	7,746	72.2	65.2	68.8
Coventry	1,073	906	1,979	70.4	61.0	65.7	1,224	997	2,221	71.0	60.8	66.0
Dudley	1,125	839	1,964	62.8	53.8	58.6	1,151	923	2,074	63.1	53.3	58.4
Sandwell	1,278	1,029	2,307	76.9	68.1	72.7	1,398	1,213	2,611	76.6	69.4	73.1
Solihull	729	563	1,292	57.4	46.4	52.0	793	696	1,489	57.8	46.9	52.1
Walsall	1,180	961	2,141	72.0	63.0	67.7	1,302	1,074	2,376	73.4	63.7	68.7
Wolverhampton	1,023	857	1,880	76.2	64.4	70.4	1,091	929	2,020	73.7	64.3	69.1
Knowsley	646	604	1,250	82.0	75.5	78.7	766	701	1,467	82.5	78.9	80.8
Liverpool	1,853	1,764	3,617	77.7	72.3	75.0	2,154	1,841	3,995	77.3	70.2	73.9
St. Helens	710	599	1,309	67.6	61.2	64.5	785	593	1,378	67.3	56.9	62.4
Sefton	951	794	1,745	58.5	51.1	54.9	1,050	878	1,928	61.4	51.1	56.2
Wirral	1,090	972	2,062	63.2	57.4	60.3	1,172	1,032	2,204	59.3	54.5	56.9
Bolton	981	759	1,740	62.8	53.1	58.1	1,054	804	1,858	63.4	53.3	58.6
Bury	509	477	986	56.8	52.0	54.4	615	499	1,114	57.7	51.4	54.7
Manchester	1,575	1,375	2,950	80.8	72.7	76.8	1,650	1,449	3,099	81.0	73.9	77.5
Oldham	1,042	904	1,946	72.9	62.9	67.9	1,192	933	2,125	73.7	62.1	68.1
Rochdale	825	644	1,469	74.2	60.9	67.7	891	725	1,616	72.0	62.1	67.2
Salford	782	705	1,487	73.4	68.2	70.9	905	775	1,680	76.4	67.7	72.1
Stockport	770	679	1,449	55.2	47.6	51.4	885	649	1,534	56.7	47.7	52.5
Tameside	859	727	1,586	71.2	60.4	65.8	943	818	1,761	69.9	63.3	66.7
Trafford	587	486	1,073	62.6	49.4	55.9	609	537	1,146	57.5	48.6	52.9
Wigan	1,094	955	2,049	62.1	54.5	58.3	1,264	1,000	2,264	63.0	52.0	57.6
Barnsley	889	721	1,610	75.7	64.5	70.2	956	831	1,787	76.6	65.5	71.0
Doncaster	1,247	987	2,234	71.2	61.0	66.3	1,311	1,021	2,332	71.7	64.8	68.5
Rotherham	1,068	911	1,979	68.9	61.4	65.2	1,124	986	2,110	68.2	59.5	63.8
Sheffield	1,669	1,434	3,103	68.6	60.2	64.4	1,796	1,485	3,281	68.3	58.8	63.7
Bradford	2,234	1,830	4,064	77.8	68.6	73.3	2,360	1,923	4,283	76.1	67.4	71.9
Calderdale	728	584	1,312	67.5	58.6	63.2	823	673	1,496	66.0	59.4	62.9
Kirklees	1,420	1,157	2,577	66.6	58.5	62.7	1,608	1,231	2,839	68.4	56.2	62.5
Leeds	2,466	2,098	4,564	68.6	58.9	63.8	2,728	2,170	4,898	69.4	58.6	64.2
Wakefield	1,124	935	2,059	68.5	60.1	64.4	1,243	1,113	2,356	69.3	60.4	64.8
Gateshead	738	579	1,317	71.4	60.9	66.4	775	707	1,482	65.8	61.4	63.6
Newcastle upon Tyne	930	787	1,717	72.5	66.5	69.7	1,016	950	1,966	72.6	70.5	71.5
North Tyneside	599	518	1,117	61.1	56.4	58.8	732	587	1,319	63.3	55.9	59.8
South Tyneside	583	488	1,071	68.3	60.4	64.5	686	585	1,271	71.2	60.8	66.0
Sunderland	1,304	1,162	2,466	74.1	65.8	70.0	1,472	1,192	2,664	74.5	63.0	68.9
Isles of Scilly	6	2	8	42.9	18.2	32.0	5	5	10	62.5	38.5	47.6
Avon	3,056	2,442	5,498	64.7	54.8	59.9	3,205	2,589	5,794	63.4	54.0	58.8
Bedfordshire	1,892	1,638	3,530	63.5	55.8	59.7	2,171	1,791	3,962	65.2	56.1	60.7
Berkshire	2,204	1,825	4,029	56.0	47.4	51.8	2,421	1,943	4,364	55.6	47.5	51.7
Buckinghamshire	2,046	1,530	3,576	55.4	45.3	50.6	2,192	1,733	3,925	55.7	45.9	50.9
Cambridgeshire	2,156	1,683	3,839	62.1	51.1	56.7	2,263	1,856	4,119	59.4	51.3	55.5
Cheshire	3,013	2,558	5,571	57.2	48.8	53.0	3,448	2,736	6,184	58.7	47.7	53.2
Cleveland	2,377	2,029	4,406	68.8	61.4	65.2	2,625	2,325	4,950	70.0	62.7	66.4
Cornwall	1,512	1,165	2,677	59.5	48.2	54.0	1,590	1,300	2,890	58.0	49.3	53.7
Cumbria	1,722	1,272	2,994	62.3	50.4	56.6	1,654	1,372	3,026	60.8	52.1	56.5
Derbyshire	3,167	2,632	5,799	63.6	54.4	59.1	3,662	2,846	6,508	64.9	55.0	60.2
Devon	3,082	2,569	5,651	61.5	52.5	57.1	3,517	2,667	6,184	62.2	50.9	56.8
Dorset	1,812	1,435	3,247	55.4	45.8	50.7	2,021	1,484	3,505	56.4	45.4	51.2
Durham	2,255	1,990	4,245	69.2	61.6	65.4	2,694	2,109	4,803	70.9	59.9	65.6
East Sussex	1,826	1,466	3,292	60.6	52.5	56.7	2,095	1,662	3,757	62.2	53.6	58.1
Essex	5,346	4,328	9,674	63.9	53.1	58.6	5,583	4,461	10,044	62.2	52.0	57.2
Gloucestershire	1,540	1,335	2,875	58.0	49.4	53.7	1,636	1,354	2,990	54.9	46.2	50.6
Hampshire	4,730	3,876	8,606	60.8	50.6	55.7	4,872	3,906	8,778	59.7	48.2	54.0
Hereford and Worcester	2,182	1,785	3,967	61.7	50.6	56.2	2,380	1,998	4,378	61.5	52.5	57.0
Hertfordshire	3,069	2,450	5,519	58.4	46.4	52.4	3,396	2,623	6,019	57.9	46.0	52.1
Humberside	3,620	2,861	6,481	71.8	60.3	66.2	3,899	3,272	7,171	70.4	61.8	66.2
Isle of Wight	429	347	776	63.5	55.3	59.5	460	365	825	62.8	58.8	60.9
Kent	5,394	4,397	9,791	63.7	55.2	59.6	5,702	4,702	10,404	62.7	53.3	58.1
Lancashire	4,739	3,950	8,689	62.3	55.3	58.9	5,102	4,243	9,345	62.5	53.9	58.3
Leicestershire	3,181	2,642	5,823	66.2	55.2	60.7	3,499	2,829	6,328	65.0	55.3	60.3
Lincolnshire	1,962	1,704	3,666	60.7	53.9	57.4	2,044	1,770	3,814	59.0	51.3	55.2
Norfolk	2,516	2,057	4,573	65.2	54.4	59.9	2,592	2,006	4,598	62.8	50.6	56.8
North Yorkshire	2,048	1,669	3,717	55.6	46.2	51.0	2,235	1,786	4,021	54.4	45.0	49.8

GCSE achievements of 15-year-old[1] pupils in maintained schools[2] 1991–92 to 1994–95
pupils with fewer than five GCSE passes at grades A–C*

	1993–94						1994–95					
	Number of pupils with fewer than five A*–C			As percentage of 15-year-olds			Number of pupils with fewer than five A*–C			As percentage of 15-year-olds		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Northamptonshire	2,225	1,841	4,066	65.1	56.8	61.1	2,342	1,960	4,302	64.7	55.1	60.0
Northumberland	1,164	941	2,105	63.7	53.5	58.7	1,278	1,028	2,306	61.9	52.3	57.2
Nottinghamshire	3,723	3,256	6,979	68.7	62.0	65.4	3,914	3,298	7,212	68.5	59.4	64.0
Oxfordshire	1,643	1,245	2,888	58.8	48.2	53.7	1,752	1,364	3,116	60.5	47.7	54.2
Shropshire	1,403	973	2,376	59.1	45.5	52.7	1,531	1,210	2,741	59.8	48.8	54.4
Somerset	1,363	1,055	2,418	57.2	47.6	52.6	1,422	1,099	2,521	57.3	47.0	52.3
Staffordshire	3,805	3,032	6,837	67.1	56.4	61.9	4,039	3,398	7,437	65.6	56.8	61.3
Suffolk	1,973	1,576	3,549	60.8	50.8	55.9	2,134	1,711	3,845	59.2	49.0	54.2
Surrey	2,369	1,938	4,307	56.7	47.5	52.2	2,612	2,010	4,622	55.7	45.5	50.7
Warwickshire	1,612	1,267	2,879	62.6	51.8	57.4	1,645	1,348	2,993	61.8	50.5	56.2
West Sussex	1,982	1,479	3,461	55.2	43.6	49.6	2,097	1,669	3,766	54.2	43.8	49.0
Wiltshire	1,691	1,346	3,037	59.3	49.4	54.5	1,786	1,381	3,167	57.0	45.9	51.6
Total (All LEAs)	160,229	132,146	292,375	64.7	55.4	60.2	173,101	141,799	314,900	64.3	54.7	59.6

[1] Age as at the beginning of the academic year.
[2] Includes LEA-maintained schools, grant-maintained schools, maintained special schools and city technology colleges.

Council of Europe Meetings

Mr. Terry Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many meetings of, or organised by, the Council of Europe since January 1995 have been attended by Ministers or officials of her Department; and if she will make a statement. [29355]

Mr. Forth: Since January 1995, officials of the Department for Education and Employment have attended 20 governmental committee or other meetings organised by the Council of Europe. There have been no meetings involving Ministers during the period concerned.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Council of Europe Meetings

Mr. Terry Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many meetings of, or organised by, the Council of Europe since January 1995 have been attended by Ministers or officials of his Department; and if he will make a statement. [29353]

Mr. David Davis: There have been 212 meetings of, or organised by, the Council of Europe since January 1995 attended by members of staff of the UK delegation to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. Officials from London have attended a further 22 such meetings.

Bosnia-Herzegovina (Civil Reconstruction)

Mr. Terry Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much money has been promised by Her Majesty's Government for the voluntary fund established by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and Council of Europe for civil reconstruction in Bosnia-Herzegovina; how much of that money has been paid; what proportion of the money has been specifically allocated to the funding and operation of *(a)* the chamber of human rights and *(b)* other institutions aimed at establishing the rule of law; and if he will make a statement. [29351]

Mr. David Davis: Her Majesty's Government have promised £3 million to the OSCE/Council of Europe voluntary fund; the full amount was paid on 29 March 1996. In view of the importance and urgency of starting the election process, the Government requested that this money be spent on elections-related expenses. Most of the UK's donation has since been used to fund the printing of voters' lists and registration application forms and the preparation of voter education material. The Government have also given £10,000 to support a centre to promote local non-governmental organisations in Sarajevo.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Restraint on Trade (Austrian Wine)

Mr. David Nicholson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what action in restraint of normal trade was taken *(a)* by the United Kingdom and *(b)* by the European Community following evidence that Austrian wine had been contaminated by chemicals in 1985; and what restraint on the normal trade in wine was applied at that time to wine exported from (i) Germany, (ii) Italy and (iii) central European countries outside the EC. [26911]

Mrs. Browning: I will write to the hon. Member.

WALES

Cattle Slaughter Scheme

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the collection points for cull cows and cattle over 30 months in Wales under the slaughter scheme; and when he expects that the scheme will become operational. [28549]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The 30-month slaughter scheme opened on 1 May, and the first animals were slaughtered on 3 May. Welsh markets and abattoirs approved by the intervention board to operate under the scheme are as follows:

Markets

Llanrwst
Llangefni
Bryncir

Llandovery
Sennybridge
Tregaron
Llanybydder
Dolgellau
Corwen
Mold
Whitland
Cardigan
Lampeter
Abergavenny
Cowbridge
Carmarthen
Llandysul
Haverfordwest
Llandeilo
Brecon
St. Asaph
Gaerwen
Newton
Newport
Ruthin
Welshpool

Abattoirs

Abergavenny Slaughter House Association Ltd.
Caernarfon, Cwmni Cig Arfon Meat Co. Cibyn
Llanidloes, E. Hamer International Ltd.
St. Asaph, David Jones and Son
Wrexham, Jones Brothers
Cardigan, Messrs Dewi James and Son
Llanybydder, Oriel Jones and Sons Ltd.
Llanelli, TWM Ltd.
Gaerwen, Welsh Country Foods Limited
Lampeter, O. Evans.

Higher Education

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is the total of *(a)* men and *(b)* women among (i) senior lecturers, (ii) lecturers and (iii) professors in further and higher education in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [28705]

Mr. Richards: The information requested is in the tables:

Table 1: Full-time academic staff at further and higher education institutions, excluding colleges of the University of Wales, in Wales, 1994[1]

	Male	*Female*	*Total*
Principals	22	3	25
Management scales	396	112	508
Principal lecturers	60	11	71
Senior lecturers	676	260	936
Lecturers scales	1,668	1,062	2,730
Other scales	37	7	44
Total	2,859	1,455	4,314

[1] At March 1994. Provisional.
Source:
Database of teacher records (DfEE).

Table 2: Full and part-time academic staff at colleges of the University of Wales, 1995[2]

	Male	*Female*	*Total*
Professors	338	16	354
Senior lecturers and researchers	583	53	636
Lecturers and researchers	1,708	753	2,461
Other grades	153	125	278
Total	2,782	947	3,729

[2] At July 1995. Provisional.
Source:
Higher education statistics agency—HESA.

Beef Exports

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what percentage of Untied Kingdom beef exports is represented by beef exported from Wales. [29043]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: In the 12 months leading up to the export ban on British beef, the estimated amount exported from Wales was 5,000 tonnes—about 1.8 per cent. of the UK total.

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how he proposes to improve the sales abroad of beef raised in Wales. [29045]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: The Government are seeking to have the export ban on British beef lifted. Once this has been achieved, beef from Wales will once again be able to compete successfully for export orders.

Welsh Development Agency

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will ensure that at least one member of the board of the Welsh Development Agency has expertise in environmental matters and sustainable development. [29374]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: Section 2(3) of the Welsh Development Agency Act 1975 specifies the range of experience that is deemed appropriate for membership of the Welsh Development Agency board. It includes environmental matters. My right hon. Friend takes full account of these requirements when considering appointments to the board.

Coal Tips (Monitoring)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many safety inspectors are employed in monitoring coal tips in the south Wales former coalfields; how many tips are monitored; and what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the inspections. [29337]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: This information is not held centrally.

The mines and quarries inspectorate administers the Mines and Quarries (Tips) Act 1969 and has responsibility under that Act for the inspection of working tips. Responsibility for inspection of disused tips rests, under part II of that Act, with local authorities.

Colliery Areas (Regeneration)

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what allocation of RECHAR funds will be made available to Wales. [29464]

Mr. Gwilym Jones: £16.9 million has been allocated under the RECHAR II programme for Wales for the period 1994 to 1997. I expect that further resources will be allocated to the initiative from the recently announced additional moneys made available to the UK from the community initiatives reserve.

Public Appointments (Women)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what percentage of public appointments made by his Department were held by women, at the most recent date for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [29596]

Mr. Hague: The most recent information about appointments that I make is set out in "Appointments by the Secretary of State for Wales, 1 March 1996", which is available in the Library of the House. The summary of appointments by gender included in the preface shows that 28 per cent. of appointments were held by women.

Council of Europe Meetings

Mr. Terry Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many meetings of, or organised by, the Council of Europe since January 1995 have been attended by Ministers or officials of his Department; and if he will make a statement. [29358]

Mr. Hague: None.

Computer Aided Medical Systems Ltd.

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to the answer 10 May, *Official Report*, column *285*, what is the estimated figure for licence income from the NHS in Wales accruing to Computer Aided Medical Systems Ltd. in each financial year since 1991–92. [29961]

Mr. Hague: The answer included the income from the NHS in Wales. The specific amounts were:

1991–92: £14,120

1992–93: £52,048

1993–94 £35,231

1994–95: £14,220

1995–96: £18,570.

LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Council of Europe Meetings

Mr. Terry Davis: To ask the Lord President of the Council how many meetings of, or organised by, the Council of Europe since January 1995 have been attended by Ministers or officials of the Privy Council Office; and if he will make a statement. [29365]

Mr. Newton: No such meetings have been attended since January 1995 by Ministers or officials of the Privy Council Office.

SCOTLAND

Control of Advertisements:

Mr. Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many appeals he has received in the last year under the Control of Advertisements (Scotland) Regulations 1984; and how many he granted. [28327]

Mr. Kynoch: The information, which is available only by calendar year, is as follows:

Calendar year: 1995

Appeals received: 301

Appeals allowed: 42

The appeals are determined under delegated authority by officers appointed by my right hon. Friend.

Public Interest Immunity (Lockerbie Investigation)

Mr. Galbraith: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the public interest immunity certificates issued in respect of the Lockerbie investigation, and the fatal accident inquiry; and to whom they were issued. [28638]

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Five public immunity certificates were signed by Government Ministers in connection with the Lockerbie fatal accident inquiry in relation to matters or documents which Ministers considered not, in the public interest, be the subject of evidence. The then Secretary of State for Transport signed four certificates which dealt with aviation security measures, the size and shape of the improvised explosive device in the radio cassette recorder, the weight of explosives and the content of confidential communications by other Governments. The then Home Secretary signed a certificate which related to information concerning national security. None of these certificates required to be produced at the fatal accident inquiry.

In 1992, the then Secretary of State for Transport signed two certificates and the then Lord Advocate signed two certificates relating to the Lockerbie disaster concerning the taking of evidence for proceedings in the United States. The taking of that evidence, however, did not proceed.

DEFENCE

Armed Forces (Roles)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 16 April, *Official Report*, column *456*, what is the estimated annual cost to his Department of each of the main functions carried out by Her Majesty's armed forces not carried out by other European members of NATO. [29869]

Mr. Soames: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox) on 6 March 1996, *Official Report*, column 232, which gives a cost for our nuclear deterrent; and to table 1.3 of "UK Defence Statistics 1995", which shows the cost of overseas garrisons and General Officer Commanding (Northern Ireland), a copy of which is in the Library of the House.

Council of Europe Meetings

Mr. Terry Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many meetings of, or organised by, the Council of Europe since January 1995 have been attended by Ministers or officials of his Department; and if he will make a statement. [29356]

Mr. Soames: There is no record of any such attendance by officials or Ministers of my Department.

HMS Sheffield

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what action has been taken or is planned to remove radioactive material from the grave of HMS Sheffield. [29764]

Mr. Soames: None.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will give *(a)* the location and *(b)* the depth at which HMS Sheffield is estimated to lie. [29763]

Mr. Soames: HMS Sheffield sank some 350 miles east of the Falkland Islands, and is lying at a depth of approximately 2,000m.

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what actions his Department has taken to retrieve objects on HMS Sheffield, which sank off the coast of the Falkland Islands in 1982; if he will list the objects which have been removed from HMS Sheffield; what forms of monitoring his Department has carried out on HMS Sheffield since she sank; and if he will make a statement; [29880]

(2) how many nuclear depth charges and of what type were carried by HMS Sheffield when she sank; and if he will make a statement; [29882]

(3) if he will list the nuclear weapons that his Department has lost in the past 30 years. [29881]

Mr. Soames: HMS Sheffield was abandoned when it proved impossible to extinguish fires resulting from a direct missile hit. She was later taken under tow, but sank six days after being hit. During those six days, small parties were helicoptered on to the ship on several occasions, primarily to assess the prospects of salvage and to see if lessons could be drawn. I understand that the only equipment that was recovered in this period was firefighting apparatus, which had been borrowed from other ships. No efforts were made to recover further equipment then or subsequently and, as HMS Sheffield sank in very deep water, no form of subsequent monitoring was either necessary or carried out.

It has been the practice of successive Governments neither to confirm nor deny the presence of nuclear weapons in specific locations at specific times. I can, however, confirm that the UK has never lost such a weapon, nor lost and subsequently recovered one.

Road Accident Deaths, Gorazde

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a copy of the special investigation branch report into the death of three soldiers from the Royal Gloucestershire, Berkshire and Wiltshire Regiment in a road accident on 12 September 1994, near Gorazde. [29879]

Mr. Soames: In common with civilian police reports, it is not my Department's practice to place service special investigation branch reports in the Library of the House. The witness statements from the SIB report into the deaths of these soldiers, however, have been made available to the next of kin.

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OFFICIAL REPORT

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 277**

SESSION 1995–96

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SCOPE OF THE INDEX, ARRANGEMENT AND ABBREVIATIONS

This index is derived from the House of Commons Library's Parliamentary On-Line Information System (POLIS), and the subject terms used are based on those used in POLIS. There are often changes in column numbering, etc., between the daily part or weekly Hansard (which simply collects together the daily parts without revision) and the bound volume. The index for the bound volume is revised to take account of these changes and cannot therefore, be used in connection with the daily part or weekly Hansard. For these versions use the Fortnightly Index.

Scope and arrangement of the Index

Oral and Written Parliamentary Questions are indexed under subject headings and the names of Members asking and Ministers replying to them. Questions are not listed under the names of Departments replying. Departmental listings can be arrived at indirectly by looking under the names of the Minister(s) of that Department. There are, however, the headings 'Northern Ireland', 'Scotland', and 'Wales' under which one can find not only most Questions answered by the Northern Ireland Office, Scottish Office, Welsh Office but also Questions about these areas of the United Kingdom which are answered by other Departments. Ministerial statements are indexed under subject headings, under 'Ministerial statements' and the names of Ministers making them and Members speaking on them. General debates are indexed under broad subject headings and under the names of all Members and Ministers taking part. Debates on legislation (Bills, Orders, Regulations etc.) are indexed under the name of the Bill, Statutory Instruments etc, under subject headings and under the names of those taking part.

Rulings and Statements by Speaker and deputies are brought together under the heading 'Speaker's rulings and statements'.

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Members' names are given in the form by which they prefer to be known and are printed in bold italics. Under their names, entries are arranged under one of the two headings *Debates, etc.* (to include interventions on statements, points of order and so on) or *Questions.*

Abbreviations

Bills 1R = first reading, 2R = second reading, Money res = money resolution, Comm = Committee stage, Rep = Report stage, 3R = third reading, amendt/amendts = amendment/amendments, * = matter taken formally, without debate.

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